

Penguin Books
The Consul's File

Paul Theroux was born in Medford, Massachusetts, in 1941, and published his first novel, *Waldo*, in 1967. He wrote his next three novels, *Fong and the Indians*, *Girls at Play* and *Jungle Lovers*, after a five-year stay in Africa. He subsequently taught at the University of Singapore, and during his three years there produced a collection of short stories, *Sinning with Annie*, and his highly praised novel, *Saint Jack*. His latest publications are *The Great Railway Bazaar: By Train Through Asia* (1975), an account of his adventurous journey by train from London to Tokyo and back, *The Family Arsenal* (1976), *Picture Palace* (1978) and a short story, illustrated by John Lawrence, *A Christmas Card* (1978). He now lives in London with his wife and two children.

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Contents

The Consul's File	7
Dependent Wife	13
White Christmas	25
Pretend I'm Not Here	35
Loser Wins	45
The Flower of Malaya	51
The Autumn Dog	61
Dengué Fever	75
The South Malaysia Pineapple Growers' Association	87
The Butterfly of the Laruts	93
The Tennis Court	101
Reggie Woo	109
Conspirators	115
The Johore Murders	123
The Tiger's Suit	133
Coconut Gatherer	145
The Last Colonial	155
Triad	167
Diplomatic Relations	181
Dear William	193

The Consul's File

It was a late recession, one of the last in Asia. The consulate in that little town had been necessary to the American rubber estates, but the rubber trees were being replaced by oil palms, and most of the Americans had left. It was my job to phase out the consulate. In other places the consular task was, in the State Department phrase, bridge-building; in Ayer Hitam I was dismantling a bridge – not a difficult job: we had never been very popular with the Malays.

I was unmarried; I had time on my hands. Because I had been told that everything I needed to know was in the files that were kept in the 'box-room' of the Residence, for a long time I avoided looking through them. I had other ideas, and whether it was the annoyance of being known in that place as just another white man or the pointless pressure of bureaucracy I served, I felt a need to stake a claim, so I might carry a bit of that town away undistorted. In a different age I might have taken a Malay mistress, but in my restless mood – excited by what I saw and yet feeling a little like a souvenir-hunter – I decided to write.

The place, people said, was full of stories. One of the first ones I heard – told to me by a member of the Ayer Hitam Club (it concerned a planter on whom a Malay woman had placed a bizarre curse; the planter died of hiccups in Aden, and the man who told me the story claimed he had been in an adjoining stateroom) – I later read in a volume of Somerset Maugham in the Club library.

I would write only what I knew to be true, or what I could

verify. But the stories were elusive, and I sometimes wondered what another writer would make of them. For example, soon after I arrived there was a grass fire in a nearby village. In itself, this was not remarkable; but the fire had unlikely consequences. The economy of this village was based mainly on the sale of marijuana that grew in tall stalks all around it, a green weed that was made into *bhong*. It was intensively cultivated and nearly all of it was exported by smugglers. A fire had started – no one knew how – and it burned for days, first in the dry brush that lay under the marijuana, and finally consuming the marijuana itself and turning it into the bitter-sweet smoke of the narcotic.

The villagers were safe; their houses were surrounded by wide dirt compounds in which nothing grew. Instead of bolting when the fire started, they stayed where they were. And a strange thing happened: for five days, breathing the smoke from the grass-fire, they remained high, staggering and yelling, beating gongs and behaving like madmen. They were people who had never tasted alcohol, orthodox muslims who threw villagers in jail for eating during the daylight hours of Ramadhan. But they inhaled the smoke and forgot their prayers; they rolled in the dust, pounced on each other, ran naked through the *kampung* and burnt a Chinese shop. Afterwards they were ashamed and stopped growing the weed, and a delegation of them made the *Haj* to Mecca to ask Allah's forgiveness.

I thought it was a great story, but I could never make more of it than that. I had only the incident. 'That would make a terrific story,' people said at the Club. But that was the whole of it; to add more would be to distort it; it was extraordinary and so – in all senses – incidental. But stories like that convinced the Club members that the town was teeming with 'material'.

They were an odd crowd who treasured their oddity. They thought of themselves as 'characters' – this was a com-

pliment in that place and the compliment was expected to be repaid. They verified each other's uniqueness: Angela Miller's dog had once had a hernia, Squibb had met Maugham at the Sultan's coronation, Alec Stewart often went to work in his pyjamas, Strang the surveyor had grown watercress in his gumboots, Duff Gillespie had once owned a Rolls-Royce. But there is something impersonal in the celebration of eccentricity. No one mentioned that Angela had had a nervous breakdown and still, frequently, went into the billiard room to cry; that Alec was married to a Chinese girl half his age, that Squibb – who had a wife in England – was married to a very fat Malay woman, or that Strang's wife, who was pretty and rapacious, danced with every member but her husband; and when *Suzie Wong* was staged at the Club no one commented on the fact that Suzie was played not by a Chinese girl but by a middle-aged and fairly hysterical English woman.

Nor did anyone find it strange that in a place where there were Hindu *bhajans*, Malay weddings and shadow plays, and Chinese operas, the Club members' idea of a night out was a long drive to Singapore to see a British *Carry On* movie, which they would laugh about for weeks afterward. They remarked on the heat: it was hot every day of the year. They didn't notice the insects, how every time a mosquito was slapped it left a smear of blood in your palm; they didn't mention the white ants, which were everywhere and ate everything. Their locutions were tropical: any sickness was a fever, diarrhoea was dysentery, every rainfall a monsoon. It wasn't romance, it was habit.

The town was some shops, the Club, the mission, the dispensary, the Methodist school, my consulate. The Indians lived on the rubber estates, the Malays in neighbouring *kampongs*, the Chinese in their shops. The town was flat; in the dry season it was dusty, in the wet season flooded; it was always hot. It had no history that anyone could remember, although during the war the Japanese had used one of its old

houses as headquarters for the attack on Singapore. The Club had once had polo-ponies and had won many matches against the Sultan; but all that remained were the trophies – the stables had been converted to staff quarters. Apart from tennis, the Club had no games, and the table in the billiard room where Angela Miller sometimes went to cry was torn and unusable.

After my first week in the town I thought I knew everything there was to know about the place; I had seen it all, I felt, and would not have minded leaving and going back to Africa where I had begun my career in the Foreign Service. The early sunlight saddened me and made me remember Africa; and yet the sun illuminated my mind as well, each dawn lending its peculiar light to my dreams. I had never dreamed much in America, but this tropical sun stirred me and I began to associate it with imagination, like the heat and noise that always woke me with a feeling of my own insignificance.

The unvarying heat, so different from the chilly weather I had known in Africa, had a curious effect on me: I had no sense of time passing – one day was just like another – and I felt puny and very old, as if my life was ending in this hot town in the east that was so small and remote it was like an island.

I had not started writing, since I considered writing my last resort. I would familiarize myself with the town by reading the files, and when I had done that and had no more excuses I would begin writing, if I still felt restless and unoccupied. I would not write much about myself; I would concentrate on the town, this island in which more and more, as they became friendly and candid, so many people said nothing ever happened.

Miss Leong, my secretary, had told me about the files. She had never seen them, but a succession of consuls had referred to them. They were secret; they were the reason my predecessors had chosen to take days off to work undisturbed at

the Residence. Miss Leong was confidential, and she gave me the key, which in her loyal Chinese way she had never used. She transmitted this sense of mystery to me, of the secrets that lay in the box-room of the Residence, and it seemed to give my job an importance greater than any I could achieve as a writer of stories. Of the three men in the Foreign Service I knew to be writers, two were failures in their diplomatic duties and the third ended up selling real estate in Maryland.

I gave Ah Wing, my house-boy, the day off; I told Miss Leong that I was working at home; and I opened the box-room. It was very dusty, and when I walked in cob-webs brushed my eyes and trailed down my face. I smelled decayed wood and the peanut-stink of dead insects. The room was small and hot and just being there made me itch. I found some cardboard boxes and inside stacks of paper bound with string. I didn't have to untie the string: I lifted it and it broke and I saw that what it had held were ragged yellow papers in which white ants had chewed their way to nest. Many of the ants were dead; but there were still live ones hurrying out of the chewed pages. Another story: dramatic; the consuls' files made illegible by the white ants, because the files were hidden and secret. Well, that was true, but I did not have to look for long to discover that there was little writing on them, and certainly no secrets; in fact, most of the pages were blank.



Dependent Wife

A road, some gum trees, a row of shop-houses, three parked cars: Ayer Hitam was that small, and even after we parked in front of the coffee shop I was not sure we had arrived. But apparently this was all – this and a kind of low dense foliage that gave, in the way it gripped the town, a hint of strangulation. It was to be months before I made anything of this random settlement. It seemed at times as if I was inventing the place. I could find no explanation for its name, which meant 'Black Water'.

The trip had started gloomy with suppressed argument. Flint, number two in the Embassy in Kuala Lumpur, had offered to drive me down and show me around. With no Malay *syce* to inhibit conversation I had expected a candid tour – Flint had been recommended to me as an old Malaysian hand. I needed information to give life to the position-papers and the files of clippings I'd studied all summer in Washington. The Political Section had briefed me in K.L., but the briefing had been too short, and when finally I was alone with the Press Officer he launched into tedious monologuing – a clinical dithyramb about his bowel movements since arriving in the country.

Flint also had other things on his mind. As soon as the road straightened he said, 'The Foreign Service isn't what it was. I remember when an overseas post meant some excitement. Hard work, drinking, romance, a little bit of the Empire. I never looked for gratitude, but I felt I was doing a real job.'

'“The White-Man's Burden”,' I said.

Flint said, 'That's my favourite poem. Someday I'll get plastered and recite it to you. People think it's about the British in India. It isn't. It's about us in the Philippines. It's a heart-breaking poem - it makes me cry.' He smacked his lips in regret. 'God, I envy you. You're on your own here. The telephone will be out of order half the time, there's a decent club, and no one'll bother you. It's just the kind of job I had in Medan in sixty-two, sixty-three.'

'It doesn't have much strategic value.'

'Never mind that,' said Flint. 'It's a bachelor post.'

I've always hated the presumption in that phrase; like *dirty weekend* it strikes me as only pathetic. I said, 'We'll see.'

'It's no reflection on you,' he said. 'They don't send married men to places like Ayer Hitam any more. Sure, I'd be off like a shot, but Lois wouldn't stand for it.' He was silent for a while, then he tightened his grip on the steering wheel and said, 'It's in the air, this dependent wife business.'

I said, 'At that party in K.L. the other night I met a very attractive girl. I asked her what she did. She said, "I'm a wife."'

'See what I mean? I bet she was eating her heart out. Hates the place, hates her husband, bores the pants off everyone with what it means to be a woman.'

'It was a silly question,' I said. 'She seemed happy enough.'

'She's climbing the walls,' said Flint. 'They hate the designation - dependent wife. Lois is going crazy.'

'I'm sorry to hear it.'

He shrugged, bringing his shoulders almost to his ears. 'I've got a job to do. She's supposed to be involved in it, but she refuses to give dinner parties.'

I said, 'They're a lot of work.'

'The hell they are - she's got three goddamned servants!' Flint glowered at the road. For miles we had been passing rubber estates, regular rows of slender trees scored with cuts, like great wilted orchards criss-crossed by perfectly straight

paths, a yellowing symmetry that made the landscape seem hot and violated. I had expected a bit more than this. 'And sometimes - I'm not kidding - sometimes she refuses to go to dinner parties with me. We've got one tonight - I'll have to drag her to it.' He squinted. 'I *will* drag her, too. She says I'm married to my job.'

'I can sympathize with some of these wives,' I said. 'They get married right out of college, the husband gets an overseas post and everything's fine - the woman becomes a hostess. Then she sees that what she's really doing is boosting her husband in his job. What's in it for her?'

'I'll tell you what's in it for her,' said Flint, turning angry again. 'She's got three square meals, duty-free booze, a beautiful home and all the servants she wants. No dishes, no laundry, no housework. And for that we get kicked in the teeth.'

'I wouldn't know about that.'

'Then listen,' said Flint. 'Lois is upset, but the younger ones are bent out of shape. Sure, they're pleasant when you first meet them, but later on you find out they're really hostile. They want jobs, they want to read the cables, they write letters to *Stars and Stripes* and sign them "Disgusted". Then they corner the ambassador's wife and start bending her ear.'

'We had a few problems like that in Uganda.'

'This isn't a problem, it's an international incident.' Now Flint was pounding the steering wheel as he spoke. 'The wives in Saigon - you know whose side they were on? The Vietcong! I won't name names but a lot of those gals in Saigon got it into their heads that they were oppressed, and believe me they supported the V.C. No, they didn't give speeches, but they nagged and nagged. They talked about "our struggle" as if there was some connection between the guerrillas shelling Nhatrang and a lot of old hens in the embassy compound refusing to make peanut-butter sandwiches. It's not funny. I knew lots of officers who were shipped home - their wives

were a security risk.' Then Flint added warily. 'You probably think I'm making this up. I'm not. They don't want to give dinner parties, they don't wear dresses any more – just these dungarees and sweatshirts. They hate coffee mornings. "What do you do?" "I'm a wife." Whoever said that to you – I'm not asking – is a very unhappy woman.'

In this way, when he could have been filling me in on Ayer Hitam, Flint ranted for the entire trip from K.L. When we arrived at the coffee shop he was a bit breathless and disappointed, as if he wished to continue the journey to continue his rant.

The door of the car was snatched open. Outside was a woman of about thirty, not fat but full-faced, yellow-brown with thick arms and a tremendous grin. She wore a *sarong kebaya* and her feet, which were bare, were so dirty I took them at first for shoes. She saw the two of us and let out a cry of gratitude and joy, a kind of welcoming yelp.

It had started to rain, large widely-spaced drops going *phut* at the roadside and turning to dust.

She said, 'It's raining! That means good luck!' She ran round to Flint's side of the car, tugged his sleeve and dragged him to a seat on the verandah, repeating her name, which was Fadila.

'Yes, yes,' she said. 'Two coffees and what else? Beer? I got some cold Tiger bottles waiting for you. You want a bowl of Chinese noodles? *Nasi goreng*? *Laksa*? Here, have a cigarette.' She offered us a round can of mentholated cigarettes and muttered for a small Chinese boy to leave us alone. 'Welcome to Ayer Hitam. Relax, don't be stuffy.'

We thanked her and she said something that sounded like 'Hawaii'. We persuaded her to say it more slowly. She said, 'Have you a wife?'

'Not him,' said Flint, slapping me on the arm in what I am sure he meant as congratulation.

'I'm coming,' she said.

She left. Flint said, 'I've never seen her before.'

'Seems very friendly.'

'Typical,' said Flint, full of approval. 'The Malays are fantastic. You get people like this all over the Federation - plenty of time for small-talk, very hospitable, give you the shirt off their back. I got this theory. You ask a guy directions in Malaysia. If the guy's Chinese he knows where you want to go but he won't tell you how to get there. If he's Indian he knows and he'll tell you. If he's Malay he won't know the place but he'll talk for ten hours about everything else. It's the temperament. Friendly. No hangups. Outgoing. All the time in the world.'

Fadila was back with the coffees. 'Americans, right?' she said, slopping coffee into the saucers as she set down the cups. 'I know Americans. Just had some here the other day, three of them, going down to Singapore. "Why go to Singapore?" I said. "Why not stay here?" I gave them a good meal, some free beer. Why not? I don't care if the manager gets cross. It's good for business - they'll be back. That's how you get customers.' She grinned at Flint, who had been listening to this with interest. 'Hey, they invited me to visit them in New York City!'

Flint said, 'You wouldn't like New York.'

'Why not? I like K.L. I like Johore Bahru. I like Seremban. Why not New York? What's your line of work, mister?'

Ordinarily, someone like Flint would have said 'business' or 'teaching' or made some vague reference to the government service. But Fadila was friendly; Fadila had spooned sugar into his coffee and stirred it; Fadila was snapping her hanky at the flies near the table. So Flint was truthful: 'I'm with the U.S. Embassy in K.L. This is your new consul. Mr Rogers's replacement.'

Fadila brightened and became even more voluble. 'Anything

you want to know I can tell you.' She winked at me. 'There's something going on here. More than you think. You don't know, mister. I hear everything. Stay here.'

This time she rushed away.

Flint said, 'Jesus, I envy you. This is the real Malaysia. Look how friendly they are!'

'They? You mean *her*.'

'They're all like that in these little towns. And I'm stuck in K.L. Maybe Lois is right – I *am* married to my job – but if it wasn't for her I could be in a place like this. And tonight I've got this dinner, another hassle.'

Fadila hurried towards us along the verandah. She was wearing a pair of sunglasses with one cracked lens and carrying two pint bottles of Tiger beer. She placed them on the table and opened them.

'It's rather early for that,' I said.

'It's free,' she said, snorting. 'It's a present. You're my guest. Drink it up.'

Flint was smiling. He drank. I drank. The beer was sweet and heavy, and on top of the coffee fairly nauseating. Fadila talked as we drank; now she was saying something about the Malays – she didn't trust them, they stole, they were lazy, they were sneaky, they lied. She knew they lied: they were always lying about her. The British were good people, but she liked Americans best of all. I listened, but she did not require any encouragement. I concentrated on finishing the bottle of beer and when I had drunk it all I felt dazed, sickened, leaden, no longer hungry, and slightly myopic, as if the beer had been squirted in my eyes.

I said, 'We have to go.'

'What's the rush?' said Flint. 'I'm enjoying myself.'

Fadila said, 'Anyway, the Residence isn't ready.'

Flint looked interested.

'You have to stay at the Club – they're still painting the Residence.'

Flint said, 'They were supposed to have finished that painting last week.'

Fadila shook her head. 'I know the *jaga* - they're not finished. But the Club is nice. I'll see you there, don't worry. I know the Head Boy, Stanley Chee. Tell him Fadila sent you. He'll take good care of you.'

I stood up and thanked her for the beer. Flint said, 'I was just telling my friend here how lucky he is to have a post like this.'

'It's quiet in Ayer Hitam,' she said. 'No rat-race here, like K.L. You can relax.'

And in the car Flint said, 'Aren't these people fantastic?'

We went to the Consulate, a three-room bungalow made into offices, flying an American flag. It faced directly onto the road, at the beginning of the long driveway which led to the Residence, where another flag flew on a taller pole. I was introduced to my secretary, Miss Leong, to the driver Abubaker and to the *peon* Peeraswami. They looked apprehensive; they were silent, stiff with worry, seeing their new employer for the first time. I felt sorry for them and tried to relieve their anxiety by staying a while to chat, but this only worried them the more, and indeed the longer I chatted the more their terror of me seemed to increase.

Although it was only a hundred yards away, we drove to the Residence, and Flint - perhaps remembering Medan - said, 'White men don't walk.'

The Residence was blistered and scorched, the columns blackened, the verandah mottled; it had the appearance of having withstood a siege. But it was the workmen, burning off the old paint with blow torches. They scurried out of broken bushes and set to work as soon as we drove in. Fadila's warning had been accurate: there was a great deal more to do. Bamboo scaffolding had been lashed together around the house, and it tottered as the workmen clung with their flames and scrapers. I could see into and through the house: it was

empty but for a figure running out at the back, shooshing chickens, slamming doors.

Flint said, 'They should have finished this painting a week ago.'

We turned to go. Fadila was leaning against the car. She was smiling, in her sunglasses, and now I could see how dirty her sarong was, the torn blouse, her grubby feet.

She said, 'I knew where to find you.'

Flint looked pleased, but when he started to talk to her she shouted something quickly in Malay to the painters. She laughed and said, 'I told them to mind their own business and get to work. No fooling and what-not. The *Tuans* are watching you. Look, they are afraid.'

'Why thanks very much,' said Flint.

But I said to her, 'That won't be necessary.'

Flint glanced at me as if to warn me that I'd been too sharp with her.

'We've got work to do,' I said.

Fadila said, 'The Consulate closes for lunch.' She looked at the sun out of the corner of her eye. 'Almost time.'

'Shall we go over to the Club?' said Flint.

'I'll show you where it is,' said Fadila.

I said, 'We'll find it.'

'Look,' she said, pointing at the painters. 'Look at those stupid men. I tell them to work and they don't work. Now they are just sitting.' She screamed at them in Malay and this time they replied, seeming to mock her. It was then that I noticed Fadila's very dirty hair.

Flint said, 'Fadila will keep them on their toes, won't you, sweetheart?'

'They are pigs,' she said. 'Malay people are no good.' She spat in their direction. 'They are dirty and lazy. They try to do things to me. Yes! But I don't let them.'

'What kind of things?' said Flint, savouring the risk in his question.

'With my head.'

I said, 'Let's go.'

But Flint was still talking to Fadila. He said, 'This is a great place. I'd like to be here myself.'

'You stay here,' said Fadila coyly; then she motioned at me. 'He can go back to K.L.'

The Club dining room was full: men in sports shirts, shorts and kneesocks, women in summer dresses, waiters in stiff jackets and ties carrying trays. It was as if we had stumbled into a lost world, but not an ancient one; here it was eternally 1938. None of the people looked directly at us, and no one had greeted us, but this exaggerated lack of interest made me as uncomfortable as if we were being stared at. A silence had fallen when we entered, then the silence became a rustling of self-consciousness, the clatter of forks, laughter and loud talking.

Flint said, 'I think I've made a friend.' After we ordered he said, 'I need a friend.'

'I'll keep an eye on her.'

'You were acting pretty funny with her,' he said. 'They're all right, these people. We could learn a lot from them. They look after their men-folk, they know how to run a house, they got a good sense of humour. You won't hear any dependent wife crap from them.'

I said nothing. I continued to eat, and I felt the attention of everyone in the room on me, the pressure of their glances; I sensed them sniffing.

Flint said, 'You won't get anywhere if you take that attitude.'

I looked at him, wishing he'd shut up.

He said, 'That high and mighty attitude, thinking people like Fadila don't matter. They do. And I'll tell you something else - she knows a lot that goes on around here.' He tapped his head. 'She's tuned in.'

'She could use a bath,' I said.

'Uncalled-for,' he said. 'You don't know how lucky we've been. We arrive in town and, bingo, we meet the greatest character in the place. I'll bet everyone knows her.'

He could not have been more right, for five minutes later there was a commotion at the door to the dining room, some shouts, a scuffling, a yell, and the entire room looked up, nodded in recognition and began muttering. The waiters stiffened at the buffet where a *rijstafel* was set out, then an old Chinese man in a white jacket marched to the door and hissed something in Malay.

Flint got to his feet; the old Chinese man – whom I took to be Stanley Chee, the Head Boy – looked at Flint. Flint said, 'Let that woman through.' The dining room went silent as Fadila walked towards us, adjusting her blouse.

Flint pulled out a chair for her and seated her at our table. She said, 'That stupid man told me to go away – because of my feet. I said I had to see you.'

'Sure you did,' said Flint.

'It's important,' said Fadila.

Flint looked at me, then frowned at his fingers.

I said, 'We were just about to leave.'

'Want to talk somewhere else?' said Flint.

Fadila said, 'These people hate me. They are bad people. All Malay people are bad, and the Chinese are pigs – they eat pigs – and the Indians always cheat you. That is Ayer Hitam. It is a nasty place. I want to go far away.'

Flint said, 'It seems a nice quiet little place.'

'No,' said Fadila. 'The people take you to the hospital. They want to do things to your head. They make you eat poison. If you refuse they slap you. At night they beat you with a *rotan*. They hide your clothes and make you naked so you cannot run away.' She leaned towards Flint, but instead of whispering she raised her voice. 'I had letters from Mr Battley and Mr Downs. "Fadila is a good *amah*, Fadila speaks English, Fadila is honest." The hospital people destroyed my

letters! They cut off my hair! They beat me! I want to be your *amah*.'

Flint said, 'We have to go.'

'Let me be your *amah*. Take me with you.'

Flint's face was fixed in a smile, but his eyes were active. 'Appointments. Business. At the Consulate.'

'The Consulate is closed.'

'Business,' he said, and jumped to his feet.

'Take me,' she said. 'You are a good man. He hates me - he thinks I am sick. But you like me. You'll let me be your *amah*.' She took his arm and from the expression on Flint's face I could tell that she must be squeezing him hard. 'I want to go with you.'

'Outside,' said Flint and started for the door with Fadila still holding tightly to his arm.

There were stares, mutters, and one clear voice *I know what I'd do with her*. Flint hurried from the dining room. I followed, as calmly as I could, and heard, just as I left the room, one word, *Americans*.

Stanley Chee met me at the door; he bowed and made me pause. He said, 'Is she troubling you? If so, I can send her away.'

'Who is she?'

'Last year she was an *amok*. She was given medicine. But she will be an *amok* again soon.'

'Strange,' I said.

'No, not strange. Her husband took another wife, a young girl from Malacca, because Fadila did not give him any children. He went away and Fadila became an *amok*. Her husband was a devil.' He straightened his gold-rimmed glasses and added, 'Sir, all Malays are devils.'

Flint was inside the car, Fadila outside with her face against the window, crying bitterly. I noticed that Flint had locked all the doors. I walked to the other side of the car, but he didn't unlock the door. He rolled the window down a crack and said,

'This is it, old buddy. It's all yours - I've got to run. Lois is expecting me. Dinner party tonight. Keep your fingers crossed. And don't let our friend here get run over.'

Fadila's face hardened as Flint drove away. She turned, limped a few feet, then faced me and said, 'He is a pig and so are you.'

White Christmas

Ah Chiang, the wife of Alec's Chinese cook, had taped bits of holly to the leaves of the potted palm. The mistletoe sprig had been knocked down by the whirling fans and was blowing across the floor under the nose of the cat, but the cotton snowflakes stuck to the mirror of the drawing room were still there. The snowflakes were Mildred's idea. She thought they made the government bungalow look festive, and there was plenty of surgical cotton in the house: Alec was a doctor at the mission hospital. And yet the decorations had a look of tropical exhaustion, shabby and temporary. The snowflakes had wilted, the holly had crinkled shut in the heat, and the mosquito coils that were burning in water-filled dishes around the room gave off a funereal aroma of incense.

It was my first Christmas in Ayer Hitam, and I was too new to the town to be able to turn down Alec's invitation. There were no cars outside when I arrived, and I thought perhaps I had got the time wrong. But I saw people at the windows and inside half a dozen guests, three Chinese, an Indian and a large dark woman who wore a Christmas corsage, a plastic Santa bandaged in cotton wool and red ribbon.

The Chinese - two slim girls and Reggie Woo - were whispering together in a corner. The dark woman was talking loudly to Mr Ratnasingham. I recognized him as the pianist who had given a recital in the club lounge in November, when the Sultan had come over for the gymkhana. He was barrel-chested, a cheery Tamil with pomaded hair and an enormous wristwatch, wearing his black recital suit rather uncomfortably in the heat.

It had just rained. The sky was low, and the trees still dripped. The smell of the rain was the smell of the dampened frangipanis, a hot close perfume of muddy blossoms and a cloud of humidity that weighted the bridge of my nose. It was only after a rain that I could smell the flowers, but the rain had brought an oppressive heat to the town that made Christmas seem absurdly distant.

Mr Ratnasingham said, 'We were just talking about Midnight Mass – they have it every year at the mission.'

'I always go,' said the woman. 'Last year there were some Eurasians there. They laughed the whole time. Disgraceful.'

I guessed she had a tincture herself or she would not have mentioned their race.

'This is our American Consul,' said Mr Ratnasingham.

The woman brightened. 'I knew Mr Gilstrap very well.'

Sam P. Gilstrap had been consul in Singapore in the Fifties. The woman was an old-timer. I said, 'Sam was half-Indian.'

Mr Ratnasingham smiled. He came close enough for me to hear his watch tick.

'Cherokee,' I said.

Mr Ratnasingham said, 'What was your previous post?'

'Africa – Uganda,' I said. 'One year they deported half a dozen Europeans for singing *White Christmas*.'

Mr Ratnasingham laughed. 'They're just down from the trees. That would never happen in Ayer Hitam.'

'I mustn't drink too much,' said the woman, and I was sure she was Eurasian by her scowl. 'I lose my voice if I drink too much brandy.'

'Miss Duckworth is in the choir,' said Mr Ratnasingham.

'So you're not the only musician, Mr Ratnasingham.'

'Please call me Francis,' he said. 'Actually, I'm a solicitor.'

'I've always been in the Christmas choir,' said Miss Duckworth.

The Chinese girls had drifted over to listen.

'We're talking about Midnight Mass,' said Mr Ratnasingham. 'Are you going?'

They gave the negative cautioning Chinese bark, and one of the girls said, 'Meffidist.'

'Drinks, drinks - who hasn't got one?' It was Alec, with a bottle of Tiger. He pumped my hand. 'I saw that enormous bottle of duty-free whisky on the table and I knew it must be yours.'

'Season's greetings.'

He made a face. 'I hate Christmas.'

'It's going to be quite a party.'

'We do it for them,' he said.

More guests had begun to arrive, Doctor Estelle Lim, the botanist; Squibb and his Malay wife; Mr Sundrum, who, half-Chinese and half-Indian, looked Malay. Alec greeted them, then went on, 'We have a Christmas party every year. It's Mildred's big day.' Mildred, rushing drinks to the newcomers, was a Chinese girl who looked twenty but might have been fifty; Alec had married her after settling in Ayer Hitam to supervise the hospital. 'She keeps it going. They appreciate it.'

I saw who they were. They weren't in the Club; they weren't of the town. Anglicized, a little ridiculous, over-neat, mostly Christian, they were a small group with no local affiliations - Methodist Chinese, Catholic Indian, undeclared half-caste - the Empire's orphans. By marriage or inclination they were the misfits of the town for whom the ritual generosity of Christmas was a perfect occasion to declare themselves. From the conversations I heard it sounded as if they had not seen one another since the previous Christmas, here at the Stewarts'.

Alec said, 'When they kick us out what'll they do then?'

I didn't know what to say.

He said, 'There won't be any more Christmas parties.'

Dr Lim came over to where we were standing. I noticed she had a glass of beer, which interested me, because the Chinese aren't drinkers. But the others were drinking beer as well, and Squibb had a large bottle of Tiger and was refilling glasses. Dr Lim was a tall woman with long black hair combed to the small of her back. She had that fine pale Chinese skin that is as tight and unmarked as the membrane on tropical fruit. She handed a small box to Alec and said, 'Merry Christmas.'

'What's this?'

'Just a present-*lah*,' she said.

'I'm going to open it, my dear,' said Alec, who looked slightly embarrassed. He tore off the gift-wrapping - reindeers, Santa Clauses, holly, snow - and took out a green and yellow necktie.

'Batik,' she said.

'Just what I need.' He kissed her on the cheek and she went away smiling. Then he said, 'I haven't worn one of these bloody nooses since 1957.' He put it on carelessly. He was wearing a blue short-sleeved sports shirt, and the garish colours of the tie made him look as if he was drunk and toppling forward.

Hovering, the others presented their gifts. Mr Ratnasingham gave him a calendar on a stand with a plastic antique car glued to the base; the Methodists gave Mildred some perfume, Miss Duckworth followed up with fancy handkerchiefs, and Mr Sundrum produced a bunch of white carnations. Everyone took turns sniffing the flowers - they were regarded as quite a prize. In a country where fantastic purple and yellow orchids showed their outlandish ears and whiskers in every garden, the colourless carnation was valued as a great rarity. Dr Lim explained how they grew them up on Fraser's Hill. Not odd, then, that we sweating foreigners should be considered so special by these dainty Malaysians; they were the orchids, we the carnations.

'The natives say if you take brandy with durian fruit you die,' said Reggie Woo.

'Codswallop,' said Alec.

'It's what they say,' said Reggie.

'I've never believed that,' said Miss Duckworth.

'Who are the natives?' I asked.

'Malays,' said Reggie.

'We're not natives,' said Hamida Squibb. 'The *sakais* are - Laruts and what-not.'

'There was an old man over in the *kampong*,' said Mr Sundrum. 'He took two cups of brandy and then ate a durian. He died. His picture was in the *Straits Times*.'

'Absolute rubbish,' said Alec. Mr Sundrum winced and went to find a vase for the carnations. Alec added in a whisper, 'But mind you, I wouldn't try it myself.'

'Drink up, Hamida,' Squibb was saying. He lurched over to me, perspiring, and snatched at my shoulder. Brandy seemed to be percolating out of his eyes. He said, 'She's a muslim - she only drinks at Christmas.'

Miss Duckworth said, 'I always cry at Christmas. I can't help it.'

Mildred, in her dark blue cheongsam, raised a sherry glass; 'Merry Christmas to everyone!' This brought mutters of, 'The very best,' 'Here's to you,' and 'Cheers.'

Ah Kwok entered from the kitchen carrying a large varnished turkey on a platter, Ah Chiang behind him with a bowl of potatoes and a gravy boat. Then Mildred flew, got Alec to carve and set out the rest of the dishes on the long table.

Mr Ratnasingham said, 'That's a big bird.'

'A sixteen pounder,' said Alec. 'Mildred bought it in Singapore - Cold Storage gets them from Australia.'

'Australia!' said one of the Methodists, clearly overwhelmed.

'And I remembered that you Americans like cranberry sauce,' said Mildred to me.

'I adore cranberry sauce,' said the other Methodist. She turned to me. 'I've always wanted to go to America.'

Mildred made a great show of seating us. Alec stood aside and said, 'I don't care where I sit as long as it's near the gin bottle,' but Mildred pushed and pointed: 'No - it has to be boy - girl - boy - girl.'

Hamida said, 'That's the way it should be. In my *kampong* the men used to eat in one room while the women served!'

'Quite right,' said Squibb. 'I thought I was marrying a Malay and look what I get. Doris Archer.'

'You're the Malay,' said Hamida.

Mildred directed me to sit between Dr Lim and one of the Methodist girls.

Alec said, 'For what we are about to receive may we be truly grateful.'

'Amen' - it chimed assertively in a dozen different voices.

Miss Duckworth said, 'This reminds me of last year.'

'And the year before,' said Alec.

'We used to have such lovely Christmases,' said Miss Duckworth. 'Of course that was in Singapore. Tang's had a Santa Claus on their roof - in a sleigh with all the reindeer. And that week your Chinese provisioner would give you a Christmas basket with tins and fruit all tied in red ribbon. Then there were drinks at the Sea-View Hotel and a carol service at the Cathedral. There were so many people there then.'

'There are people there now,' said Reggie Woo.

'I mean English people,' said Miss Duckworth. 'Now it's all Japanese.'

Dr Lim said, 'We used to think white people smelled like cheese.'

'Like corpses,' said Mildred. 'But it was their clothes. After they had been here for a few months they stopped smelling like dead cheese.'

'I like cheese,' said Reggie Woo.

'So do I!' said one of the Methodists, and everyone nodded:

cheese was very good, and one day Malays, Indians and Chinese would realize that.

'Santa Claus is still on Tang's roof, Elsie,' said Mildred. 'I saw it when I picked up the turkey.'

'Cute,' said Hamida.

'Cold Storage was decorated, too. They were playing carols on the loudspeaker system.'

'But there's no one there to appreciate it,' said Miss Duckworth. 'No, they don't have Christmases like years ago.'

'Christmas in England,' said Mr Sundrum. 'That's a real white Christmas.'

'Horrible,' said Squibb. 'You have no idea. We had a council house outside Coventry. All I remember is expecting something to happen that never happened. I didn't know my old man had been laid off.'

'But the snow,' said Mr Sundrum.

'Hate it,' said Squibb. 'Freezes the pipes.'

'I'd like to see snow,' said Mr Sundrum. 'Just once. Maybe touch it.'

'Ah Kwok, show Sundrum to the fridge,' said Alec. 'He wants to stick his hand in the freezing compartment.'

Ah Kwok cackled and brought second helpings.

Dr Lim said, 'Listen - it's starting to rain.'

It was; I could see the palm fronds nodding at the window, and then it began on the roof, a light patter on the tiles. It encouraged talk, cheerless and regretful, of other Christmases, of things no one had ever seen, of places they had never visited; phrases heard second-hand and mispronounced. They were like children with old inaccurate memories, preparing themselves for something that would never occur.

In that same mood, Dr Lim said, 'I had a dream last night about my father.'

'I like hearing people's dreams,' said Mildred.

'My father is dead,' said Dr Lim, and she gave her plate a nudge. She lit a cigarette.

'I don't think I want to hear,' said one of the Methodists.
'Go on, Estelle,' said Alec. 'You've got us all in suspense.'

'He came into my room,' she said. 'But he was dressed in white pyjamas - Chinese ones, with those funny buttons. He was buried in clothes like that. He had something in his hand and I could tell he was very cross. Then I saw what he was holding - an opium pipe. He showed it to me and came so close I could see the tobacco stains on his teeth. I said to him, "What do you want?" He didn't reply, but I knew what he was thinking. Somehow, he was thinking, *You're not my daughter any more.*'

'That gives me the shivers,' said Mildred.

'Then he lifted up the opium pipe and broke it in half,' said Dr Lim. 'He just snapped it in my face. He was angry.'

'And you woke up,' said Mr Ratnasingham.

'Yes, but that was the strange part. When I woke up he was still there in my room. The white pyjamas were shining at me. I looked harder and he backed out the door.'

Everyone had stopped eating. Dr Lim puffed her cigarette, and though her face was fixed in a smile I could see no pleasure in it.

'White is the Chinese colour for death,' said Mr Sundrum.

'That's what I mean,' said Dr Lim.

'Like black is for us,' said Reggie Woo.

Mildred said, 'I think it's time for the Christmas pudding. Alec, get your brandy butter.'

Hamida said, 'I don't believe in ghosts. Do you, Francis?'

'I'm a Catholic,' said Mr Ratnasingham.

Miss Duckworth had begun to cry. She cried without a sound, terribly, shaking her shoulders as if she was trying to stand up.

'Can I get you anything?' said one of the Methodists.

'No,' whispered Miss Duckworth, sobbing hoarsely. 'I always cry at Christmas.'

The girl said, 'I wasn't here last year.'

Squibb said, 'I used to dress up as Santa Claus. But you're all getting old now, and besides I'm drunk.'

The Christmas pudding was carried alight from the kitchen by Ah Kwok, and Ah Chiang brought the cheese board. I finished my pudding quickly, and seeing me with an empty bowl, Dr Lim passed me the cheese. She said, 'You must have some of this.'

'Just a slice of the brie,' I said.

'That's not brie - it's camembert,' said Dr Lim.

'He doesn't know the difference!' cried Reggie Woo.

Mr Ratnasingham said, 'How about a Christmas song?' He began to sing *White Christmas* in his trembling Tamil voice. The others joined in, some drunkenly, some sweetly, drowning the sound of the rain on the bungalow roof.

'You're not singing,' muttered Dr Lim to me.

So I did, but it was awkward because only I knew the last verse, and I was obliged to sing it alone like a damned fool while the others hummed.



Pretend I'm Not Here

Even an amateur bird-watcher knows the bird from the way the empty nest is woven on a limb; and the wallpaper you hate at your new address is a pattern in the former tenant's mind. So I came to know Rogers, my predecessor at the consulate, from the harsh-voiced people who phoned for him at odd hours and the unpaid bills that arrived to reveal his harassments so well. That desk drawer he forgot to empty told me a great deal about his hoarding postcards and the travels of his friends (Charlie and Nance in Rome, Tom and Grace in Osaka – interesting, because both couples reported 'tummy-aches'). But I knew Rogers best from the habits of Peeraswami, the Indian clerk, and the descent of Miss Harbottle.

Peeraswami said, 'I see European lady today morning, Tuan,' and I knew he had no letters. Rogers had allowed him to take credit for the mail: he beamed with an especially important letter and handed it over slowly, weighing it in his brown hand like an award; if there were no letters he apologized and made conversation. Rogers must have found this behaviour consoling. It drove me up the wall.

'Thank you.' I went back to my report.

He hesitated. 'In market. With camera. Taking snaps of City Bar's little girl.' Woo Boh Swee, who owned the establishment, was known locally as City Bar, though his elder child was always called Reggie. 'European from America.'

'An American?' I looked up. 'How do you know?'

'Wearing a hat,' he said. 'Carrying her own boxes.'

'That doesn't mean she's an American.'

'Riding the night bus.' He smiled. 'American.'

A show of contempt from the barefoot mail-boy. Americans, once thought of as free-spenders and luxury travellers, were now considered cheapskates. What he said was partly true: the night bus from Kuala Lumpur was used mostly by American students and Tamil rubber tappers. But Peeraswami was such a know-it-all, I hoped he was wrong.

I saw her after lunch. She was sitting on the front steps of the consulate, fiddling with her camera. Her suitcases were stacked next to her. I recognized her from the hat. It was a Mexican model, and the wide brim was tied at the sides by a blue ribbon, making it into a silly bonnet with a high conical crown.

She said, 'I shouldn't be doing this in broad daylight.'

She was juggling little yellow capsules, changing the film in her camera. I stepped past her and unlocked the front door.

'Are you open now?' She looked up and made a horrible face at the sun.

'No,' I said. 'Not until two. You've got a few minutes more.'

'I'll just sit right here.'

I went inside, and reflecting on that hat, considered leaving by the back door. But it was too hot for tennis, too early for a drink; and I had work to do. I turned on the fan and began signing the letters I'd dictated that morning. I had signed only three when the door burst open.

'Hey!' She was at the door, undoing her bonnet. 'Where's Mr Rogers?'

'I'm the new consul.'

'Why didn't you say so out there?'

'I only admit to it during office hours,' I said. 'It cuts down on the work.' I showed her my pen, the letters on my blotter.

'Well, I've got a little problem,' she said. Now her bonnet was off, and I could see her face clearly. She was sunburned, plump and not young; her hands were deeply freckled and she stood leaning one fist on my desk, talking to me as if at an

employee. 'It's to do with accommodation. I don't have any, and I was counting on Rogers. I know him from Riyadh.'

'He's in Turkey now,' I said. 'But there's a rest house in town.'

'It's full.'

'There are two Chinese hotels.'

She leaned still further on her fist: 'Did you ever spend a night in a Chinese hotel?'

'There's a camp site,' I said. 'If you know anything about camping.'

'I camped my way through the Great Nafud. That's where I met Rogers,' she said. 'I wrote a book about it.'

'Then Ayer Hitam shouldn't bother you in the least.'

'My tent was stolen yesterday in K.L., at the bus depot.'

'You have to be careful.'

'It was stolen by an American.'

She looked as if she was holding me responsible. I said,

'I'll keep an eye out for it. In the meantime -'

'All I want is a few square feet to throw my sleeping bag,' she said. 'You won't even know I'm there. And don't worry - I'll give you an acknowledgement in my book.'

'You're writing another one, are you?'

'I always do.'

It might have been the heat or the fact that I had just noticed she was a stout woman in late middle-age and looked particularly plain and vulnerable in her faded cotton dress, with her sunburned arms and peeling nose and a bulbous bandage on her thumb. I said, 'All right then. Be at my house at six and I'll see what I can fix up for you.'

Ah Wing met me in the driveway as Abubaker swung the car to a halt. Ah Wing had been Rogers' cook, and he was old enough to have been cook for Rogers' predecessor as well; he had the fatigued tolerance of the Chinese employee who treats his employers as cranky birds of passage. He said, 'There is a *mem* in the garden.'

'Wearing a hat?'

'Wearing.'

She had spread a ground-sheet on the grass and opened one of her suitcases. A half-rolled sleeping bag lay on the ground-sheet, and she was seated on the second suitcase, blowing up a rubber air-mattress. She took the nozzle out of her mouth and said, 'Hi there!'

'You're not going to sleep here, are you?'

'This suits me fine,' she said. 'I'm no sissy.' The implication being that I was one for using a bed. 'Now you just leave me be and pretend I'm not here. Don't worry about me.'

'It's the grass I'm worried about,' I said. 'New turf. Rather frail.'

She allowed herself to be persuaded, and gathered up her camping equipment. Inside the house she said, 'You live like a king! Is this all yours?'

'It's rented from the Sultan.'

'Tax-payers' money,' she said, touching the walls as she went along.

'This is considered a hardship post by the State Department.'

'I haven't seen any hardships yet,' she said.

'You haven't been in town very long,' I said.

'Good point,' she said.

She was in the bedroom; she dropped her suitcases and sat on the bed and bounced. 'A real bed!'

'I suppose you'll be wanting dinner?'

'No, sir!' She reached for her handbag. 'I've got all I need right here.' She took out a wilted branch of rambutans, half a loaf of bread and a tin of Ma Ling stew.

'That won't be necessary,' I said.

'Whatever you say.' On the verandah she said, 'You do all right for yourself,' and punished the gin bottle; and over dinner she said, 'Golly, do you eat like this every day?'

I made non-committal replies, and then I remembered. I said, 'I don't even know your name.'

'Harbottle,' she said. 'Margaret Harbottle. Miss. I'm sure you've seen my travel books.'

'The name rings a bell.'

'The Great Nafud was the toughest one. Rogers didn't have a place like this!'

'It must be very difficult for a woman to travel in Saudi Arabia.'

'I didn't go as a woman,' she said.

'How interesting.'

'I went as a man,' she said. 'Oh, it's really quite simple. I'm ugly enough. I cut my hair and wore a burnouse. They never knew the difference!'

She went on to tell me of her other travels, which were stories of cheerful privations, how she had lived on dates and Nile water for a week in Juba, slept in a ditch in Kenya, crossed to Lamu by dhow. She was eating the whole time she spoke, jabbing her fork in the air as if spearing details. 'You won't believe this,' she said, 'but I haven't paid for a meal since Penang, and *that* was a misunderstanding.'

'I believe it.'

She looked out of the window at the garden. 'I'm going to paint that. Put it in the book. I always illustrate my own books.'

'With illustrations by the author''.

We finished dinner and I said, 'I usually read at this time of day.'

'Don't let me interrupt your routine,' she said.

We had coffee, and then I picked up my novel. She sat in the lounge with me, smoking a Burmese cheroot, looking around the room. She said, 'Boy, you do all right!' I glanced up in annoyance. 'Go ahead - read,' she said. 'Pretend I'm not here.'

Days later she was still with me. Ah Wing complained that her food was stinking up the bedroom. There was talk of her at the Club; she had been seen sniffing around the Sultan's

summer house, and then had come to the Club bar and made a scene when she was refused a drink. She got one eventually by saying she was my house-guest. I signed the chits the next day: five gins and a port and lemon. It must have been quite an evening.

Her worst offence was at the river. I heard the story from Peeraswami. She had gone there late one afternoon and found some men bathing, and she had begun photographing them. They had seen her but, stark naked, they couldn't run out of the water. They had shouted. She photographed them shouting. They had thrown stones at her. She photographed that. It was only when she started away that the men wrapped themselves in sarongs and chased her, but she had taken one of their bicycles and escaped.

'They think I haven't seen a man before,' she said, when I asked her about it.

'Malay men are modest,' I said.

'Believe me, they've got something to be modest about!'

I decided to change the subject. I said, 'I'm having some people over tomorrow for drinks.'

'I don't mind,' she said.

'I was hoping you wouldn't.'

'And don't worry about me,' she said. 'Just pretend I'm not here.'

I was tempted to say, 'How?' I resisted and said, 'You don't do much painting.'

'The light's not right.'

The next evening she had changed into a clean dress. I could not think of a polite way of getting rid of her. She stayed, drank more than anyone and talked non-stop of her travels. When the guests left, she said, 'They were nice, but kind of naïve, you know what I mean?'

'Miss Harbottle,' I said, 'I'm expecting some more people this weekend.'

She smiled. 'Pretend I'm not here.'

'That is not a very easy thing to do,' I said. 'You see, they're staying overnight, and I was planning to put them in your room.'

'But you have lots of rooms!'

'I expect lots of guests.'

'Then I'll sleep on the grass,' she said. 'I intended to do that anyway. You won't even know I'm there.'

'But if we decide to play croquet we might disturb that nap you always have after lunch.'

'It's your meals,' she said. 'I usually don't eat so much. But I hate to see food go to waste.'

That was Thursday. On Friday I had a visit from Ali Mohammed. 'It is about your house-guest,' he said. 'She took some cloth from my shop and has not paid for it.'

'She might have forgotten.'

'That is not all. The men she photographed at the river are still cross. They want very much to break up her camera. And Mekmal says she scratched his pushbike.'

'You'll have to see her about it.'

'This is serious,' he said, glowering and putting on his *songkok*. 'She is your house-guest.'

'She won't be much longer.'

I can't say I was sorry her inconvenience extended to Ali Mohammed; he had been in the habit of saying to me, 'When is Tuan Rogers coming back?' And then it occurred to me that an unwelcome guest is like a weapon. I could use Miss Harbottle quite blamelessly against Ali or Peeraswami, both of whom deserved her. An unwelcome guest could carry annoyance to your enemy; you only had to put them in touch.

'Ali Mohammed was in the office today,' I said over lunch. 'He says you took some cloth from him without paying for it.'

'I thought it was a present.'

'He didn't think so.'

'When I go to a country,' said Miss Harbottle, with a note of

instruction in her voice, 'I expect to be given presents. I'm writing a book about this place. I'm *promoting* these people.'

'That reminds me,' I said. 'I've decided to charge you rent.'

Miss Harbottle's face fell. 'I never pay,' she said. 'I don't carry much cash.' She squinted at me. 'That's pretty unfair.'

'I don't want money,' I said.

She said, 'You should be ashamed of yourself. I'm fifty-two years old.'

'And not that either,' I said. 'Your payment will be a picture. One of your watercolours for every night you stay here from now on.'

'I can't find my brushes.'

'I'll buy you some new ones.'

'I see,' she said, and as soon as we finished eating she went to her room.

Late that same night the telephone rang. It was Peeraswami. He had just come from a meeting outside the mosque. Ali Mohammed was there, and Mekmal, and City Bar, and the men from the river, the rubber tappers – everyone with a grievance against Miss Harbottle. They had discussed ways of dealing with the woman. The Malays wanted to humiliate her; the Chinese suggested turning the matter over to a secret society; the Indians had pressed for some expensive litigation. It was the first time I had seen the town united in this way, their single object – the plump Miss Harbottle – inspiring in them a sense of harmonious purpose. I didn't discourage Peeraswami, though he reported the proceedings with what I thought was uncalled-for glee.

'I'm afraid there's nothing I can do,' I said. She was Rogers's guest, not mine; Rogers's friends could deal with her.

'What to do?' asked Peeraswami.

'Whatever you think best,' I said. 'And I wouldn't be a bit surprised if she was on the early bus tomorrow.'

In the morning, Ah Wing woke me with tea and the news that there were twenty people in the garden demanding to see

me. I took my time dressing and then went out. They saw me and called out in Malay, 'Where is she? Where is the *orang puteh*?'

Ah Wing shook his head. He said, 'Not here.'

'Liar!' Peeraswami yelled, and this cry was taken up by the others.

Ah Wing turned to me and said, 'She left early - on the Singapore bus.'

'Liar!' said Peeraswami again. 'We were at the bus station.'

'Yes,' said Ali Mohammed. 'There was no woman at the station.' He had a stick in his hand; he shook it at me and said, 'We want to search your house.'

'Wait,' I said. 'Did you see a European?'

'A man only,' said Ali Mohammed.

'A fat one,' said Peeraswami with anger and disgust. 'He refused Mekmal to carry his boxes.'

I'm sure my laughter bewildered them; I was full of gratitude for Miss Harbottle. I loved her for that.

Loser Wins

The insects warbled at the windows, and on the wall a pale gecko chattered and flicked its tail. It was one of those intimate late-night pauses – we had been drinking for two hours and had passed the point of drunken chit-chat. Then, to break the silence, I said, 'I've lost my spare pair of glasses.'

'I hadn't noticed,' said Strang. A surveyor, he had the abrupt manner of one who works alone. He was mapping this part of the state and he had made Ayer Hitam his base. His wife, Milly, was devoted to him, people said; it seemed an unusual piece of praise. Strang picked up his drink. 'You won't find them.'

'It's an excuse to go down to Singapore for a new pair.'

Strang looked thoughtful. I expected him to say something about Singapore. We were alone. Stanley Chee had slammed the door for the last time and had left a tray of drinks on the bar that we could sign for on the chitpad.

Still Strang didn't reply. The ensuing silence made my sentence about Singapore a frivolous echo. He walked over and poured himself a large gin, emptied a bottle of tonic into the tall glass and pinched a new slice of lemon into it.

'I ever tell you about the Parrishes?'

A rhetorical question: he was still talking.

'Married couple I met up in Kota Bahru. Jungle bashers. Milly and I lived there our first year – looked like paradise to us, if you could stand the sand-flies. Didn't see much of the Parrishes. They quarrelled an awful lot, so we stayed as far away as possible from their arguments. Seemed unlucky.'

We'd only been married a few months.' He smiled. 'Old Parrish took quite a shine to Milly.'

'What did the Parrishes argue about?' Was this what he wanted me to ask? I hoped he was not expecting me to drag the story out of him. I wanted him to keep talking and let it flow over me. But even at the best of times Strang was no spellbinder; tonight he seemed agitated. 'See, that shows you've never been spliced,' he said. 'Married people argue about everything - anything. A tone of voice, saying please, the colour of the wallpaper, something you forgot, the speed of the fan, food, friends, the weather. That tie of yours - if you had a wife she'd hate you for it. A bone of contention,' said Strang slowly, 'is just a bone.'

'Perhaps I have that in store for me.' I filled my own drink and signed for that and Strang's.

'Take my advice,' he said. 'No - it was something you said a minute ago. Oh, you lost your specs. That's what I was going to say. The Parrishes argued about everything, but most of all they argued about things they lost. I mean, things *she* lost. She was incredible. At first he barely noticed it. She lost small things, lipstick, her cigarettes, her comb. She didn't bother to look for them. She was very county - her parents had money, and she had a kind of contempt for it. Usually she didn't even try to replace the things she lost. The funny thing is, she seemed to do it on purpose - to lose things she hated.'

'He was the local magistrate. An Outward Bound type. After a week in court he was dead keen to go camping. Old Parrish - he looked like a goat, little pointed beard and those sort of hairy ears. They went on these camping trips and invariably she lost something en route - the house keys, her watch, the matches, you name it. But she was a terrific map-reader and he was appalling, so he really depended on her. I think he had some love for her. He was a lot older than she was - he'd married her on a Long Leave.'

“Once, he showed how much he loved her. She lost fifty dollars. Not a hard thing to do – it was a fifty-dollar note, the one with the mosque on it. I would have cried, myself, but she just shrugged, and knowing how she was continually losing things he was sympathetic. “Poor thing,” he says, “you must feel a right charlie.” But not a bit of it. She had always had money. She didn’t take a blind bit of notice, and she was annoyed that he pitied her for losing the fifty sheets. Hated him for noticing it.

“They went off on their camping trips – expeditions was more like it – and always to the same general area. Old Parrish had told me one or two things about it. There was one of these up-country lakes, with a strange island in the middle of it. They couldn’t find it on the map, but they knew roughly where it was supposed to be – there’s never been a detailed survey done of the Malaysian interior. But that’s where the Parrishes were headed every weekend during that dry season. The attraction was the monkeys. Apparently, the local *sakais* – they might have been Laruts – had deported some wild monkeys there. The monkeys got too stropky around the village, so being peace-loving buggers the *sakais* just caught them and tied them up and brought them to the island where they wouldn’t bother anyone. There were about a dozen of these beasts, surrounded by water. An island of wild monkeys – imagine landing there on a dark night!

“In the meantime, we saw the Parrishes occasionally in the compound during the week and that’s where I kept up to date with the story. As I say, his first reaction when she lost things was to be sympathetic. But afterwards, it irritated him. She lost her handbag and he shouted at her. She lost her watch – it was one he had given her – and he wouldn’t speak to her for days. She mislaid the bathplug, lost some jewellery, his passport disappeared. And that’s the way it went – bloody annoying. I don’t know what effect this had on her. I suppose

she thought she deserved his anger. People who lose things get all knotted up about it, and the fear of losing things makes them do it all the more. That's what I thought then.

'And the things she lost were never found. It was uncanny, as if she just wished them away. He said she didn't miss them.

'Then, on one of these expeditions she lost the paraffin. Doesn't seem like much, but the place was full of leeches and a splash of paraffin was the only thing that'd shake them loose from your arms or legs. They both suffered that weekend and didn't find the island either. Then, the next weekend, she lost the compass, and that's when the real trouble started. Instead of pitying her, or getting angry, or ignoring, it old Parrish laughed. He saw how losing the compass inconvenienced her in her map-reading, and she was so shaken by that horrible laugh of his she was all the more determined to do without it. She succeeded, too. She used a topographical map and somehow found the right landmarks and led them back the way they'd come.

'But Parrish still laughed. I remember the day she lost the car-keys - *his* car-keys, mind you, because she'd lost practically everything she owned and now it was his stuff up the spout. You could hear old Parrish half-way to Malacca. Then it was the malaria tablets. Parrish laughed even harder - he said he'd been in the Federation so long he was immune to it, but being young and new to the place she'd get a fever, and he found that screamingly funny. This was too much for her, and when his wedding ring just went missing - God only knows how *that* happened - and Parrish just laughed, that was the last straw. I suppose it didn't help matters when Parrish set off for the courthouse in the morning saying, "What are you going to lose today, my darling?"

'Oh, there was much more. He talked about it at parties, laughing his head off, while she sulked in a corner, and we expected to find him dead the next morning with a knitting-needle jammed through his wig.

But, to make a long story short, they went off on one of their usual expeditions. No compass, no paludrine, no torch – she'd lost practically everything. By this time, they knew their way and they spent all that Saturday bushwhacking through the *ulu*. They were still headed in that deliberate way of theirs for the monkey island, and now I remember that a lot of people called him "Monkey" Parrish. She claimed it was mythical, didn't exist, except in the crazy fantasies of a lot of *sakais*; but Monkey said, "I know what you've done with it, my darling – you've lost that island!" And naturally he laughed.

"They were making camp that night in a grove of bamboos when it happened. It was dusk, and looking up they saw one of those enormous clouds of flying foxes in the sky. Ever see them? They're really fruit-bats, four feet from tip to tip, and they beat the air slowly. You get them in the *ulu* near the coast. Eerie, they are – scare the wits out of you the way they fly, and they're ugly as old boots. You can tell the old ones by the way they move, sort of dropping behind and losing altitude while the younger ones push their noses on ahead. It's one of the weirdest sights in this country, those flying foxes setting off in the twilight, looking so fat and fearsome in the sky. Like a bad dream, a kind of monster film – they come out of nowhere.

"She said, "Look they're heading for the island."

"He said, "Don't be silly – they're flying east, to the coast."

"There's the light," she said, "that's west." She claimed the bats preferred islands and would be homing in on one where there was fruit – monkey food. The wild monkeys slept at night, so they wouldn't bother the bats. She said, "I'm going to have a look."

"There's no torch," he says, and he laughs like hell.

"There's a moon," she says. And without another word she's crashing through the bamboos in the direction the foxes are flying. Parrish – Monkey Parrish – just laughed and sat down by the fire to have a pipe before bed. Can you see him

there, chuckling to himself about this wife of his who loses everything, how he suddenly realizes that she's lost herself and he has a fit of laughter? Great hoots echoing through the jungle as old Parrish sees he's rid of her at last!

'Maybe. But look at it another way. The next morning he wakes up and sees she's not there. She never came back. At first he slaps his thigh and laughs and shouts, "She's lost!" Then he looks around. No map, no compass, no torch - only that low dense jungle that stretches for hundreds of miles across the top of the country, dropping leeches on anyone who's silly enough to walk through it. And the more he thinks about it the more it becomes plain to him that *he's* the one who's lost - she's wished him away, like the wedding ring and the torch and the fifty-dollar bill. Suddenly, he's not laughing any more.

'I'm only guessing. I don't really know what he was thinking. I had the story from her, just before she left the country. She said there were only two monkeys on the island, a male and a female, bickering the whole time, like her and her late husband. Yes, *late* husband. No one ever found him - certainly not her, but she wouldn't would she?'

The Flower of Malaya

'Is she one of yours?' they'd ask on the Club verandah when a white girl went past. Nothing salacious intended: they were just wondering if she was American. It was in this way - a casual inquiry to which I did not have an answer - that I discovered Linda Clem. We assigned names to strangers, a tropical pastime, nicknaming them at a distance; she was 'The Flower of Malaya'. For a brief period I found it hard to think of her and not be reminded of that disappointed ghost the Malays believe in, who is known simply as Pontianak, 'The Ghost'. Pontianak has a pretty face and is always alone. She takes a trishaw, but when it arrives at the destination and the driver asks for the fare, the seat is empty, Pontianak is gone. Or she stops a man on a jungle path - something Malay women never do - and asks the man to follow her. The offer is not usually refused, but when she turns to go the man sees she has an enormous hole in her back. Then she melts away. At night, before heavy storms, she can be heard weeping in the banana groves. Pontianak is the ghost of a woman who died in childbirth and she has been sighted from Kota Bahru on the north coast to Kukup in the south; the Javanese know her, so do the Sumatrans. She gets around, but what does she want?

Linda Clem got around, and she had Pontianak's melancholy. It seems to come easily to most women - there is a kind of sisterhood in sadness. She was a teacher. That work, so simple at home, spells disaster in the East. They have such hopes; and it always ends so badly. She taught English, most

of them do, never asking themselves what happens when a half-starved world is mumbling in heavily-accented English, 'I want—' She struck me as accident-prone, but I suppose that was her job, her nationality, her boy-friend.

She was a plump, graceless soul who hated her body. She had fat legs and a bottom only a Chinese upholsterer could have admired. But she had a pretty face with slightly magnified features, and she had long beautiful hair. Within a week of arriving she was in a sarong — ill-fitting, but it took care of those legs. Within a month she was on the arm of a boy vaguely related to the Sultan, a cousin of a cousin, known locally (but inaccurately) as 'Tunku', The Prince. He was a charming idle fellow who owed money at every Chinese shop in town.

A hopeless liaison: he wanted to be American, she aimed at being Malay — the racial somersault often mistaken for tolerance. It was usually inverted bigotry, rattling on your own race. I saw their determined effort at affection, strolling hand-in-hand across the maidan, or at the Club social evenings — evidently she thought she was teaching us a thing or two about integration; and at City Bar, smooching under the gaze of the Chinese secret society that congregated there. I guessed The Prince was using her money — she looked credulous enough to loan it to him. How pathetic to watch the newcomer, innocent to the deceptions of the East, making all the usual mistakes.

I waited for the eventual break-up, but it happened sooner than I expected. One morning she appeared at the consulate just after we opened. She pushed Peeraswami aside, ignored the secretary's squawk and flung open my office door.

'I'm looking for the Consul,' she said.

'Do you have an appointment?' I asked.

'The secretary already asked me that,' she said. 'Look, this is an emergency.'

She sat down and threw her shoulder-bag on a side-table. Is it only Americans who treat consulates as their personal

property, and diplomatic personnel as their flunkies? 'They move in and walk all over you,' a colleague used to say – he kept his door locked against American nationals demanding service. It earned us, in Ayer Hitam, the contemptuous pity of European consulates.

Miss Clem said, 'I want to report a break-in.'

'I'm afraid that's a matter for the police.'

'This is confidential.'

'They can keep a secret,' I said.

'You're my consul,' she said rather fiercely. 'I'm not going to any Malay cop.' She was silent a moment; then she said, 'A man's been in my room.'

I said nothing. She glared at me.

'You don't care, do you?'

'I find it hard to understand your alarm, Miss Clem.'

'So you know my name.' She frowned. 'They told me you were like that.'

'Let's try to be constructive, shall we?' I said. 'What exactly did the man do?'

'You want details,' she said disgustedly.

'Isn't that why you came here?'

'I told you why I came here.'

'You'll have to be specific. Are you reporting a theft?'

'No.'

'Assault?'

'Kinda.'

'Miss Clem,' I said, and I was on the point of losing my temper, 'I'm very busy. I can't read your mind and I'd rather you didn't waste my time. Now play ball!'

She put her face in her hands and began to blubber, clownish notes of hooted grief. She had that brittle American composure that breaks all at once, like a windscreen shattered with a pebble. A fat girl crying is an appalling sight, in any case, all that motion and noise. Finally she spoke up: 'I've been raped!'

I closed the door to the outer office, and said, 'Do you know who did it?'

She nodded sadly and pushed her hair out of her eyes. She said, 'Ibrahim.'

'The Prince?'

'He's no prince,' she said. Then plaintively, 'After all I did for him.'

'You'll have to go to the police and make a statement.'

'What will I say?' she said in a small voice.

'Just tell them what happened.'

'Oh, God, it was really awful,' she said. 'He came through the window with no clothes on – just like that. I was up combing my hair and I saw him in the mirror. He turned off the light and grabbed me by the arm. I tried to push him away, but you know, it was really strange – he was all slippery. His skin was covered by some kind of oil. "Cut it out," I said. But he wouldn't. He didn't say anything. He just lifted me up by the legs like a wheelbarrow, and – I'll never forgive him for this. I was giving him English lessons!'

'Tell that to the police. I'll send you in my car. They'll want to know the times and that sort of thing.'

'What'll they do?'

'I imagine they'll arrest him, if they can find him.'

'They'll find him,' she said bitterly. 'I just saw him in town.'

So Ibrahim, The Prince, was picked up, and Miss Clem pressed charges. Only the younger members of the Club wondered why The Prince had stayed around. The rest of us knew how Miss Clem had ventured into danger; she had led him on and the poor dumb Malay had misread all her signs. Miss Clem had discovered how easy it was, after all, to be a Malay. It was typical enough for farce.

Squibb said, 'She got just what she deserved. She was asking for it.'

'She doesn't know the first thing about it,' said Strang.

Squibb squinted maliciously: 'She knows now. The Flower of Malaya's been deflowered.'

I said I agreed with them – it was fatal to disagree with anyone in such a small post – but I sympathized with the girl. She knew nothing of the country; she had fallen in head-first. All you had to do to survive was practise elementary caution. In one sense she deserved what she got, but it was a painful lesson. I had some sympathy for The Prince, too; he was not wholly to blame. He had mistaken her for one of his own. But how was he to know? They were all beginners, that was the worst of these inter-racial tangles: how infantile they were!

Predictably, Miss Clem stopped wearing her sarong. She tied her hair differently, and she began dropping into the Club alone. The members were kind to her – I noticed she usually had a tennis partner, and that was truly an act of kindness, since she was such a dreadful player. Overnight, she acquired the affectations of a memsahib; a bit sharp with the waiters and ball-boys, a common parody of hauteur in her commands, that odd exaggerated play-actor's laugh, and a posture I associate with a woman who is used to being waited on – a straight-backed rigidity with formal, irritated hand-signals to the staff, as if her great behind was cemented to a plinth. Then I disliked her, and I saw how she was patronized by the Club bores, who rehearsed their ill-natured stories with her. She encouraged them in racial innuendo; the memsahib lapping at the double peg in her glass. A month before she had been sidling up to a Malay and probably planning to take out citizenship; now she was in a high-backed Malacca chair under a fan calling out, 'Boy!'

There was, so far, no trial. Ibrahim the Prince was languishing in Central Jail, while the lawyers collected evidence. But they hadn't extracted a confession from him, and that was the most unusual feature of the whole business, since even an innocent man would own up simply to get a night's sleep. The

Ayer Hitam police were not noted for their gentleness with suspects.

One night at the Club Miss Clem spoke to me in her new actressy voice. 'I want to thank you for all you've done. I'm glad it's over.'

'You're welcome,' I said, 'but I'm afraid it's not over yet. There's still the trial. You won't like that.'

'I hope you'll be there to give me moral support.'

'I don't like circuses,' I said. 'But if there's anything useful I can do, let me know.'

The following week she had a different story, a different voice. She entered the consulate as she had that first time, pushing my staff aside and bursting into my office. She had been crying, and I could see she was out of breath.

'You're not going to believe this,' she said. Not the mem-sahib now, but that other voice of complaint, the innocent surprised. She sat down. 'It happened again.'

'Another break-in?'

'I was raped,' she said softly.

'The Prince is in jail,' I said in gentle contradiction.

'I'm telling you I was raped!' she shouted, and I was sure she could be heard all the way to the Club.

'Well who do you suppose could have done it?'

She said nothing; she lowered her eyes and sniffed.

'Tell me, Miss Clem,' I said, 'does this sort of thing happen to you often?'

'What do you mean "often"?'

'Do you find that when you're alone, in a strange place, people get it in their heads to rape you? Perhaps you have something that drives men wild, some hidden attraction.'

'You don't believe me. I knew you wouldn't.'

'It seems rather extraordinary.'

'It happened again. I'm not making it up.' Then she pulled the top of her dress across one shoulder and showed me, just below her shoulder bone, a plum-coloured bruise. I looked

closer and saw circling it were the stitch-marks of a full set of teeth.

'You should have that seen to,' I said.

'I want that man caught,' she insisted.

'I thought we *had* caught him.'

'So did I.'

'So it wasn't The Prince?'

'I don't know,' she said.

'Was it the same man as before?'

'Yes, just like before. He was terrible – he laughed.'

And her story was the same, even the same image as before, about him picking her legs up 'like a wheelbarrow', a rather chilling caricature of sexuality. Truth is not a saga of alarming episodes; it is a detail, a small clear one, that gives a fiction life. Hers was that horrible item, unusual enough to be a fact and too bizarre to be made up, about the slippery skin of the rapist. He was greasy, slimy – his whole body gleamed. She couldn't fight against him; she couldn't get a grip on him. He had appeared in her room and pounced on her, and she was helpless. This time she said she had resisted and it was only by biting on her that he held on.

I said, 'You'll have to drop your charges against The Prince.'

'I'm afraid to.'

'But don't you see? He's in jail, and if it was the same man as before then it couldn't have been The Prince.'

'I don't know what to do.'

'I suggest you get a telephone installed in your house. If you hear any suspicious noises, ring me or the police. Obviously it's some local person who fancies you.'

But The Prince was not released. Somehow the police had extracted a confession from him, a date was set for the trial and Miss Clem was scheduled to testify. That was weeks away. In the meantime, Miss Clem had her telephone put in. She rang me one evening shortly afterward.

'Is there anything wrong?' I asked, hearing her voice.

'Everything's fine,' she said. 'I was just testing it.'

'From now on only ring me in the event of an emergency,' I said.

'I think I'm going to be all right,' she said, and rang off.

For a brief period I forgot about Miss Clem, The Flower of Malaya. I had enough to keep me busy – visa matters were a continual headache. It was about this time that the Strangs got their divorce – which is another story – but the speculation at the Club, up to then concerned with Miss Clem, was centred on what Milly Strang could possibly be doing in Bali. She had sent a gleeful postcard to Angela, but nothing to Lloyd. Miss Clem dropped from view.

My opposite number came down from Penang on a private visit and we had a little reception for him. The invitation specified 'drinks 6-8 p.m.' but at eleven there were still people on the verandah badgering the waiters for fresh drinks. My reaction was tactical: I went into my study and read the cables. Usually it worked – when the host disappears the guests are at sea; they get worried and invariably they take the hint.

The telephone rang. I was not quick and when I picked up the receiver the line went dead. At first I did nothing; then I remembered and was out of the door.

Peeraswami, my Tamil *peon*, had been helping out at the party. As I rushed out of the back door I noticed him at the edge of the courtyard, chatting to the kitchen staff. I called to him and told him to get into the car. On the way I explained where we were going, but I did not say why.

Miss Clem's house was in the teachers' compound of the mission school. It was in darkness. I jammed on the brakes and jumped out. Peeraswami was right behind me. From the bungalow I could hear Miss Clem sobbing.

'Go around back,' I said to Peeraswami. 'In those trees. If you see anyone, catch him.'

Peeraswami sprinted away. I went into the house and stumbled in the direction of the sobbing. Miss Clem was alone, sitting on the edge of the bed. I switched on the light and saw her sad fat body on the rumpled bedclothes. She had an odd shine, a gloss on her skin that was lit like a snail's track. But it covered her stomach; it was too viscous to be perspiration and it had the smell of jungle. She was smeared with it, and though she seemed too dazed to notice it, it was like nothing I had ever seen before. She lay down sobbing and pulled a sheet over herself.

'It was him,' she said.

'The Prince?'

'No, no! Poor Ibrahim,' she sobbed.

'Take a bath,' I said. 'You can come back to my house when you've changed.'

'Where are you going?'

'I've got to find my *peon*.'

I found him hurrying back to the house. In the best of times he had a strange face, his dark skin and glittering teeth, his close-set eyes and on his forehead a thumbprint of ashes, the eye of God. He was terrified – not a rare thing in Peeraswami, but terror on that Tamil face was enough to frighten anyone else.

'*Tuan!*' he cried.

'Did you see him?'

'Yes, yes,' he said. 'He had no clothings, no shirtings. Bare-naked!'

'Well, why the hell didn't you catch him?' I snapped.

'*Tuan,*' said Peeraswami, 'no one can catch *Orang Minyak*.'

'You knew him?'

'Everyone know him.'

'I don't understand,' I said. '*Orang* is man. But *Minyak* – is that a name?'

'It his name. *Minyak* – oily, like ghee butter on his body. You try but you cannot catch hold. He trouble the girls, only

the girls at night. But he Malay spirit – not Indian, *Malay*, said Peeraswami, as if disclaiming any responsibility for another race's demons.

An incubus, I thought. What a fate for the Flower of Malaya. Peeraswami lingered. He could see I was angry he hadn't caught *Orang Minyak*. And even then I only half-believed.

'Well, you did your best,' I said, and reached out to shake his hand. I squeezed and his hand shot away from mine, and then my own hand was slippery, slick and smelling of jungle decay.

'I touch, but I do not catch,' said Peeraswami. He stooped and began wiping his palms on the grass. 'You see? No one can catch *Orang Minyak*.'

The Autumn Dog

'Mine used to sweat in his sleep,' said the woman in the white dress, a bit drunkenly. 'It literally poured off him! During the day he'd be dry as a bone, but as soon as he closed his eyes, bang, he'd start dripping.'

Her name was Maxine Stanhope and practically the first thing she had said to the woman who sat opposite was, 'Please call me Max, all my friends do.' They sat on the verandah of a hotel outside Denpasar, in Bali, in the sun the other tourists avoided. They had dark reptilian tans and slouched languorously in the comfortable chairs like lizards sunning themselves on a rock. Lunch was over, the wine was gone, their voices were raised in emphatic friendliness. They had known each other for only three hours.

'Mine didn't sweat that much, but he made the most fantastic noises,' said Milly Strang. 'He carried on these mumbling monologues, using different voices, and groaning and sort of swallowing. Sometimes I'd wake up and just look at him and laugh.'

'It's not funny,' said Maxine. But she was laughing; she was the larger of the two, and sharp-featured, her hair tugged back and fitting her head closely. There was a male's growl of satisfaction in her laugh, not the high mirth you would have expected from that quick, companionable mouth. 'When I remember the things he put me through, I think I must have been crazy. Mine made me warm his cup. I should have broken it over his head.'

'Mine had this way of pawing me when he was feeling

affectionate. He was really quite strong. He left bruises! I suppose he thought he was – what's the expression? – turning me on.'

'They always think that,' said Maxine. She held the empty wine bottle over the other's glass until a drop fell out. 'Let's have another – wine makes me honest.'

'I've had quite enough,' said Milly.

'You're the boss,' said Maxine. Then she said, 'Mine weighed two-hundred pounds.'

'Well, mine was at least that. I'm not exaggerating. When I think of him on top of me – it's ludicrous.'

'It's obscene. Mine kept gaining weight, and finally I said to him, "Look, if this goes on any more we won't be able to make love." Not that *that* worried me. By then I'd already taken a lover – not so much a lover as a new way of life. But Erwin said it didn't matter whether you were fat or thin. If you were fat you'd just find a new position.'

'The fat man's position!'

'Exactly. And he got this – this manual. All the positions were listed, with little diagrams and arrows. Arrows! It was like fitting a plug, an electrical manual for beginners. "Here," he said, "I think that one would suit us." They all had names – I forget what that one was, but it was the fat man's position. Can you imagine?'

'Mine had manuals. Well, he called them manuals. They were Swedish I think. You must have seen them. Interesting and disgusting at the same time. He didn't want me to see them – I mean, he hid them from me. Then I found them and he caught me going through them. Honestly, I think I gave him quite a shock. He looked over my shoulder. "Ever see anything like it?" he said. I could hear him breathing heavily. He was getting quite a thrill!'

'Did yours make a fuss over the divorce?'

'No,' said Milly, 'what about yours.'

'He divorced *me*. Nothing in particular – just a whole series

of things. But, God, what a messy business. It dragged on for months and months.'

'Mine was over before I knew it.'

'Lucky,' said Maxine.

'Up till then we'd been fairly happy.'

'Happy marriages so-called turn into really messy divorces,' said Maxine.

'I think not,' said Milly. 'The best marriages end quickly.'

Theirs, the Strangs', had gone on serenely for years, filling us with envious contempt. It fell to pieces in an afternoon of astonishing abuse. They had pretended politeness for so long only an afternoon was necessary. Then we were friendlier towards the couple, no longer a couple, but Milly alone in the house and Lloyd at the Club. The marriages in Ayer Hitam were no frailer than anywhere else, but we expatriates knew each other well and enjoyed a kind of kinship. A divorce was like a death in the family. Threatened with gloom, we became thoughtful. The joking was nervous: Milly had burned the toast; Lloyd had made a pass at the *amah*. Afterward, Lloyd clung to the town. He was over-rehearsed. One of his lines went, 'It was our ages. Out of the horse latitudes and into the roaring forties.' He was no sailor, he was taking it badly.

Milly, unexpectedly cheerful, packed her bags and left the compound. Within a week she was in Indonesia. Before she left she had said to Angela Miller, 'I always wanted to go to Bali. Lloyd wouldn't let me.' She went, Lloyd stayed, and it looked as if he expected her back: her early return to Ayer Hitam would have absolved him of all blame.

It did not happen that way. Before long, we all knew her story. Milly saw friends in Djakarta. The friends were uneasy with this divorced woman in their house. They sent their children out to play and treated her the way they might have treated a widow, with a mixture of sombreness and high spirits, fearing the whole time that she'd drink too much and burst into tears. Milly found their hospitality exhausting and went

to Djokjakarta, for the temples. Though tourists (seeing her eating alone) asked her to join them, she politely refused. How could she explain that she liked eating alone and reading in bed and walking whenever she wished and doing nothing? Life was so simple, and marriage only a complication. Marriage also implied a place: you were married and lived in a particular house; unmarried, you lived in the world, and there were no answers required of you. Milly changed her status slowly, regaining an earlier state of girlishness from the widowhood of divorce. Ten years was returned to her, and more than that, she saw herself granted a valuable enlightenment, she was wiser and unencumbered, she was free.

The hotel in Bali, which would have been unthinkable expensive for a couple with a land surveyor's income, was really very cheap for one person. She told the manager (Swiss; married – she could tell at a glance) she would stay a month. There was a column in the hotel register headed *Destination*. She left it blank. The desk-clerk indicated this. 'I haven't got one,' she said, and she surprised the man with her natural laugh.

The tourists, the three-day guests at the hotel, the ones with planes to catch, were middle-aged; some were elderly, some infirm, making this trip at the end of their lives. But there were other visitors in Bali and they were mostly young. They looked to Milly like innocent witches and princelings. They slept on the beach, cooked over fires, played guitars; she saw them strolling barefoot or eating mountains of food or lazing in the sand. There was not a sign of damage on them. She envied them their youth. For a week Milly swam in the hotel's pool, had a nap after lunch, took her first drink at six and went to bed early: it was like a spell of convalescence, and when she saw she had established this routine she was annoyed. One night, drinking in the bar, she was joined by an Australian. He talked about his children in the hurt remote way of a divorced man. At midnight, Milly stood up and snapped her handbag shut. The man said, 'You're not going, are you?'

'I've paid for my share of the drinks,' she said. 'Was there something you wanted?'

But she knew, and she smiled at the fumbling man, almost pitying him.

'Perhaps I'll see you tomorrow,' she said, and was gone.

She left the hotel, crossed by the pool to the beach and walked towards a fire. It was the makeshift camp of the young people and there they sat, around the fire, singing. She hesitated to go near and she believed that she could not be seen standing in that darkness, listening to the music. But a voice said, 'Hey! Come over here, stranger!'

She went over and, seating herself in the sand, saw the strumming boy. But her joining the group was not acknowledged. The youths sat crosslegged, like monks at prayer, facing the fire and the music. How many times, on a beach or by a roadside, had she seen groups like this and, almost alarmed, looked away! Even now she felt like an impostor. Someone might ask her age and laugh when she disclosed it. She wished she was not wearing such expensive slacks; she wished she looked like these people – and she hoped they would not remind her of her difference. She was glad for the dark.

Someone moved behind her. She started to rise, but he reached out and steadied her with his arm and hugged her. She relaxed and let him hold her. In the firelight she saw his face: twenty years old! She put her head against his shoulder and he adjusted his grip to hold her closer. And she trembled – for the first time since leaving Ayer Hitam – and wondered how she could stop herself from rolling him over on the sand and devouring him. Feeling that hunger, she grew afraid and said she had to go: she didn't want to startle the boy.

'I'll walk you back to the hotel,' he said.

'I can find the way.' Her voice was insistent; she didn't want to lose control.

The boy tagged along, she heard him trampling the sand; she wanted him to act – but how? Throw her down, fling off

her clothes, make love to her? It was mad. Then it was too late, the hotel lights illuminated the beach; and she was relieved it had not happened. *I must be careful* - she almost spoke it.

'Will I see you again?'

'Perhaps,' she said. She was on her own ground: the white hotel loomed behind the palms. Now - here - it was the boy who was the stranger.

'I want to sleep with you.' It was not arrogant but imploring.

'Not now.'

Not now. It should have been *no*. But marriage taught you how to be perfunctory, and Milly had, as a single woman, regained a lazy sense of hope. *No* was the prudent answer; *Not now* was what she had wanted to say - so she had said it. And the next day the boy was back, peering from the beach at Milly, who lounged by the pool. In the sunlight he looked even younger, with a shyness that might have been an effect of the sun's brightness, making him hunch and avert his eyes. He did not know where to begin, she saw that.

Milly waved to him. He signalled back and like an obedient pet responding to a mistress's nod came forward, vaulted the hibiscus hedge, smiling. Instead of taking the chair next to her he crouched at her feet, seeming to hide himself.

'They won't send you away,' said Milly. 'You can say you're my guest.'

The boy shrugged. 'At night - after everyone clears out - we come here swimming.' He was silent, then he said, 'Naked.'

'How exciting,' said Milly, frowning.

Seeing that it was a mockery, the boy did not reply. He got to his feet. For a moment, Milly thought he was going to bound over the hedge and leave her. But in a series of athletic motions he strode to the edge of the pool, and without pausing tipped himself into it. He swam under water and Milly followed

his blue shorts to the far end of the pool where he surfaced powerfully, flinging his arms into the water. But he did not climb out of the pool; he rested his forearms on the tiles and said, 'Come in. I'll teach you how to swim.'

'I was swimming before you were born.' She wished she had not said it, she wished it was not true. She picked up a magazine from her lap and plucked at a page.

The boy was beside her, dripping.

'Take this,' she said, and handed him a towel. He buried his face in it with an energy that aroused her, then he wiped his arms and threw it aside.

'Time for lunch,' said Milly.

'Let me treat you,' said the boy.

'That's very thoughtful of you,' said Milly, 'but I'm afraid they won't let you in the dining room like that.'

'They have room service. We can have it sent up - eat on the balcony.'

'You seem to be inviting yourself to my room,' said Milly.

'No,' said the boy, 'I'm inviting you to mine.'

Milly almost laughed. She said, '*Here?*'

'Sure. I've been here for about six weeks.'

'I've never seen you at breakfast.'

'I never eat breakfast,' said the boy. 'And I've only used my room a few times in the past week or so. I met a girl over on the beach - they have a house there. But my stuff is still in my room. My money, camera, passport, watch - the rest of it. I don't want it stolen.'

'It must be fearfully expensive.'

'My mother pays.'

'How very American.'

'She's on a tour - in Hong Kong,' said the boy. 'I thought we were talking about lunch.'

'If you're a guest at this hotel, then you must have other clothes here. I suggest you dress properly, and if there's an empty chair at my table I have no objection to your joining

me.' Her voice, that fastidious tone, surprised and appalled her.

The boy's name was Mark. He told her that over lunch, but he said very little else. He was so young there was practically nothing he could say about himself beyond his name, and it was for Milly to keep the conversation going. It was not easy in her new voice. She described her trip through Indonesia, everything that had happened to her since leaving Ayer Hitam, but after that she was stumped. She would not speak about Lloyd or the divorce, and it angered her that it was impossible to speak about her life without discussing her marriage. Nearly twenty years had to be suppressed, and it seemed as if nothing had happened in those years that could matter to this young boy.

To his timid questions she said, 'You wouldn't understand.' She was hard on him. She knew why: she wanted him in the simplest way, and she resented wanting him. She objected to that desire in herself that would not allow her to go on alone. She did not want to look foolish - the age difference was ridicule enough - and wondered if in shrinking from an involvement she would reject him. She feared having him, she feared losing him. He told her he was nineteen and eagerly added the date of his next birthday.

'See you later, then,' said Mark. He shook her hand.

In her room, she cursed herself. It had not occurred to her that he might not be interested. But perhaps this was so. He had a girl, one of the innocent witches; but her fate was the Australian who, late at night, rattled the change in his pocket and drawled in a persuasive way to interest her. She pulled the curtains, shutting out the hot sun, and for the first time since she arrived lay down on her bed wondering not if she should go, but where.

She closed her eyes and heard a knock on the door. She got out of bed, sighed, and opened the door a crack. 'What is it?'

'Let me come in,' said Mark. 'Please.'

She started and said nothing. Then she moved aside and

let the boy swing the door open. He did this with unnecessary force, as if he had expected her to resist.

Milly had not written any letters. A few postcards, a message about the weather. Letters were an effort because letters required either candour or wit, and her solitary existence had hardened her to both. What Milly had done, almost since the hour she had left Ayer Hitam, was rehearse conversations with an imaginary friend, a woman, for whom in anecdote she would describe the pleasures of divorce. Flying alone. The looks you got in hotels. The Australian. A room of one's own. The witches and princelings on the beach. Misunderstandings. The suspicious eyes of other men's wives. The mystery and the aroma of sexuality a single woman carried past mute strangers.

Listen, she imagined herself saying; then she reported, assessed, justified. It was a solitary traveller's habit, one enforced by her separation from Lloyd. She saw herself leaning over a large menu, in the racket of a restaurant – flowers on the table, two napkin cones, a dish of olives – and she heard her own voice: *I think a nineteen-year-old boy and a woman of – let's be frank – forty-one – I think they're perfectly matched sexually speaking. Yes, I really do. They're at some kind of peak. That boy can have four or five orgasms in a row, but so can a middle-aged woman – given the chance. It's the middle-aged man with all his routines and apologies that makes the woman feel inadequate. Sex for a boy, granted, is usually a let-down because he's always trying himself out on a girl his age, and what could be duller? It hurts, Jim, and hurry up, and what if my parents find out? What I'm saying, and I don't think it's anything to be ashamed of, is Mark and I were well-matched, not in spite of our ages, but on the contrary, on the contrary. It was like coaching a champion. I know I was old enough to be his mother, but that's just the point. The age ratio isn't insignificant. Don't laugh – the boy of a certain age and his mother would make the best of lovers –*

But lovers was all they'd make. Conversation with Mark was impossible. He would say, 'I know a guy who has a fantastic yacht in Baltimore.'

A yacht. At the age of twenty-three, when Mark was one, Milly had driven her own car to the south of France and stayed with her uncle, a famous lawyer. That handsome man had taken her on his yacht, poured her champagne and tried to seduce her. He had failed, and angrily steered the yacht close to the rocky shore, to scare her. Later he bought her an expensive ring, and in London took her to wonderful restaurants, treating her like his mistress. He renamed his yacht *Milly*. Lloyd knew part of the story. To Mark Milly said, 'I was on a yacht once, but I was much younger then.'

For three weeks, in her room, in his, and twice on the beach, they made love. They kissed openly and made no secret of the affair. The guests at the hotel might whisper, but they never stayed longer than a few days, and they took their disapproval away with them. Milly herself wondered sometimes what would happen to her when Mark left, and she grew anxious when she remembered that she would have to leave eventually. She had no destination; she stayed another month: it was now November, and before Christmas she would exhaust herself of this boy. She was not calculating, but she saw nothing further for him. The affair, so complete on this bright island, would fail anywhere else.

Mark spoke of college, of books he planned to read, of jobs he'd like to have. It was all a hopeful itinerary she had traced before: she'd made that trip years ago, she'd read the books and known all the stops. She felt – listening to him telling her nothing new – as if she'd returned from a long sojourn in the world, one on which he, encumbered with ambition, was just setting out. She smiled at his innocent plans, and she gave him some encouragement; she would not disappoint him and tell him he would find nothing. He never asked for advice;

The years had coincided with her own marriage, but she had endured them and, like Maxine, earned her freedom. She had borne marriage long enough to see it disproved. 'But it didn't save it - it couldn't,' said Maxine. Her face darkened. She said, 'He was evil. He wanted Mark. But Mark wouldn't have him - he was devoted to me.'

'Mark is a nice boy,' Maxine said, 'Mark is lovely.'

'At first I was sorry he told you about me. I was afraid to meet you. I thought you'd dislike me.'

'But you're not marrying him, are you?' 'I couldn't,' said Milly. 'Anyway, I'm through with Marriage.'

'Good,' said Maxine. 'The Autumn Dog.'

'And Max,' said Milly, using the woman's name for the first time, 'I don't want you for a mother-in-law!'

'No - we'll be friends.'

'What a pity I'm leaving here.'

'Then we must leave together.'

And the other woman's replies had come so quickly that Milly heard herself agreeing to a day, a flight, a destination.

'Poor Mark,' said Milly at last.

'He's a lovely boy,' said Maxine. 'You have no idea. We go to plays together. He reads to me. I buy all his clothes. I like to be seen with him. Having a son like Mark is so much better than having a husband.'

Milly felt the woman staring at her. She dropped her eyes. 'Or a ...' you, said Maxine. 'That's much better. You - he's very frank. He made me

table. She Milly's fingers and

we'll be

anted to

ends;
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when I remembered our beleaguered Peace Corps teachers – but I believe it was even harder to be a Japanese in that place. They had lost the war and gained the world; they were unreadable, impossible to know; more courtly than the Chinese, they used this courtliness to conceal. The Chinese were secretive bumbler and their silences could be hysterical; the Japanese gave nothing away; they never betrayed their frenzy. This contempt they were supposed to have: it wasn't contempt, it was a total absence of trust in anyone who was not Japanese. And what was perhaps more to the point, they were the opposite to the English in every way I could name.

The war did not destroy the English – it fixed them in fatal attitudes. The Japanese were destroyed and out of that destruction came different men; only the loyalties were old – the rest was new. Shimura, who could not have been much more than thirty, was one of these new men, a post-war instrument, the perfectly calibrated Japanese. In spite of what everyone said, Shimura was an excellent tennis player.

So was Evans, and it was he who organized the Club game: How to get rid of Shimura?

Squibb had a sentimental tolerance for Malays and a grudging respect for the Chinese, but like the rest of the Club members he had an absolute loathing for the Japanese. When Alec said, 'I suppose we could always debag him,' Squibb replied fiercely, 'I'd like to stick a *kukri* in his guts.'

'We could get him for an infraction,' said Strang.

'That's the trouble with the obnoxious little sod,' said Squibb. 'He doesn't break the rules. We're lumbered with him for life.'

The hatred was old. The word 'Changi' was associated with Shimura. Changi was the jail in Singapore where the British were imprisoned during the war, after the fall of the city, and Shimura was held personally responsible for what had gone on there: the water torture, the *rotan* floggings, the bamboo rack, the starvation and casual violence the Japanese

inflicted on people they despised because they had surrendered.

'I know what we ought to do,' said Alec. 'He wants his tennis. We won't give him his tennis. If we kept him off the courts we'd never see his face here again.'

'That's a rather low trick,' said Evans.

'Have you got a better one?' said Squibb.

'Yes,' said Evans. 'Play him.'

'I wouldn't play him for anything,' said Squibb.

'He'd beat you in any case,' said Alec.

Squibb said, 'But he wouldn't beat Tony.'

'Not me - I'm not playing him. I suggest we get someone else to beat him,' said Evans. 'These Japs can't stand humiliation. If he was really beaten badly we'd be well rid of him.'

I said, 'This is despicable. You don't know Shimura - you have no reason to dislike that man. I want no part of this.'

'Then bugger off!' shouted Squibb, turning his red face on me. 'We don't need a bloody Yank to tell us -'

'Calm yourself,' said Alec. 'There's ladies in the bar.'

'Listen,' I said to Squibb, 'I'm a member of this Club. I'm staying right here.'

'What about Shimura?' said Alec.

'It's just as I say, if he was beaten badly he'd be humiliated,' said Evans.

Squibb was looking at me as he said, 'There are some little fuckers you can't humiliate.'

But Evans was smiling.

The following week Shimura showed up late one afternoon full of beans. He changed, had tea alone and then appeared on the court with the towel around his neck and holding his racket like a sword. He chopped the air with it and looked around for a partner.

The court was still except for Shimura's busy shadow, and at the far end two ball-boys crouched with their sarongs folded

Also by Paul Theroux:

Saint Jack

When Jack Flowers jumped ship in Singapore, he soon learnt the ropes. Variousy a sailor, ship's chandler, hustler, pornocrat and benevolent pimp, he was able to offer visitors 'anything you want, anything at all', and it was his proud claim that he never failed to satisfy his clients.

At first he was the youngest drinker in the Bandung Club, but now at fifty-three he is almost a fixture there, and an institution in Singapore.

Expatriates like Jack begin to fear dying in an alien tropic. But he is hopeful, for he has a 'perfect dream of magic'. The problem is converting a fantasy of success into reality, away from the seamy, cockroach-ridden waterfront . . .

' . . . a witty, subtle, often moving self-portrait of a memorable rogue ' - *Observer*

'I'm a bit old for that sort of thing.'

'We can do anything you want – anything,' he said. 'Just live with me. No strings. Look, we can't stay here forever –'

It was true: she had nowhere to go. Milly was not fool enough to believe that it could work for any length of time, but for a month or two it might be fun. Then somewhere else, alone, to make a real start.

'We'll see,' she said.

'Smile,' he said.

She did and said, 'What would you tell your mother?'

'I've already told her.'

'No! What did she say?'

'She wants to meet you.'

'Perhaps – one day.' But the very thought of it filled her with horror.

'Soon,' he said. 'I wrote to her in Hong Kong. She replied from Bangkok. She'll be here in a week or so.'

'Mine was so pathetic when I left him,' Milly was saying. 'I almost felt sorry for him. Now I can't stand the thought of him.'

'As time goes on,' said Maxine, 'You'll hate him more and more.' Abstractedly, she said, 'I can't bear them to touch me.'

'No,' said Milly, 'I don't think I could ever hate –'

Maxine laughed. 'I just thought of it!'

'What?'

'The position my husband suggested. It was called "the Autumn Dog". Chinese, I think. You do it backwards. It was impossible, of course – and grotesque, like animals in the bushes. He accused me of not trying – and guess what he said?'

'Backwards!'

'He said, "Max, it might save our marriage"!'

It struck Milly that there were only a few years – seconds in the life of the world – when that futile sentence had meaning.

The years had coincided with her own marriage, but she had endured them and, like Maxine, earned her freedom. She had borne marriage long enough to see it disproved.

'But it didn't save it - it couldn't,' said Maxine. Her face darkened. She said, 'He was evil. He wanted Mark. But Mark wouldn't have him - he was devoted to me.'

'Mark is a nice boy.'

Maxine said, 'Mark is lovely.'

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Milly felt the woman staring at her. She dropped her eyes.

'Or a friend like you,' said Maxine. 'That's much better. He told me all about you - he's very frank. He made me jealous, but that was silly, wasn't it? I think you're a very kind person.'

She reached across the table. She took Milly's fingers and squeezed.

'If you're kind to me we'll be such good friends.'

'Please stop!' Milly wanted to say. The other woman was

hurting her hand with the pressure of her rings, and she seemed to smile at the panic on Milly's face. Finally, Milly said it, and another fear made the demand into a plea. Maxine relaxed her grip, but she held on, even after Mark appeared at the agreed time, to hear the verdict.

Dengué Fever

There is a curious tree, native to Malaysia, called 'The Midnight Horror'. We had several in Ayer Hitam, one in an overgrown part of the Botanical Gardens, the other in the front garden of William Ladysmith's house. His house was huge, nearly as grand as mine, but I was the American Consul and Ladysmith was an English teacher on a short contract. I assumed it was the tree that had brought the value of his house down. The house itself had been built before the war – one of those great breezy places, a masterpiece of colonial carpentry, with cement walls two feet thick and window blinds the size of sails on a Chinese junk. It was said that it had been the centre of operations during the occupation. All this history diminished by a tree! In fact, no local person would go near the house; the Chinese members of the staff at Ladysmith's school chose to live in that row of low warrens near the bus depot.

During the day the tree looked comic, a tall simple pole like an enormous coat-rack, with big leaves that looked like branches – but there were very few of them. It was covered with knobs, stark black things; and around the base of the trunk there were always fragments of leaves that looked like shattered bones, but not human bones.

At night the tree was different, not comic at all. It was Ladysmith who showed me the underlined passage in his copy of Professor Corner's *Wayside Trees of Malaya*. Below the entry for *Oroxylum indicum* it read, 'Botanically, it is the sole representative of its kind; aesthetically, it is monstrous

... The corolla begins to open about 10 p.m., when the tumid, wrinkled lips part and the harsh odour escapes from them. By midnight, the lurid mouth gapes widely and is filled with stink ... The flowers are pollinated by bats which are attracted by the smell and, holding to the fleshy corolla with the claws on their wings, thrust their noses into its throat; scratches, as of bats, can be seen on the fallen leaves the next morning ...'

Smelly! Ugly! Pollinated by bats! I said, 'No wonder no one wants to live in this house.'

'It suits me fine,' said Ladysmith. He was a lanky fellow, very pleasant, one of our uncomplicated Americans, who thrives in bush postings. He cycled around in his bermuda shorts, organizing talent shows in *kampongs*. His description in my consulate file was 'Low risk, high gain'. Full of enthusiasm and blue-eyed belief; and open-hearted: he was forever having tea with tradesmen, whose status was raised as soon as he crossed the threshold.

Ladysmith didn't come round to the Club much, although he was a member and had appeared in the Footlighters' production of Maugham's *The Letter*. I think he disapproved of us. He was young, one of the Vietnam generation with a punished conscience and muddled notions of colonialism. That war created drop-outs, but Ladysmith I took to be one of the more constructive ones, a volunteer teacher. After the cease-fire there were fewer; now there are none, neither hippies nor do-gooders. Ladysmith was delighted to take his guilt to Malaysia, and he once told me that Ayer Hitam was more lively than his home-town, which surprised me until he said he was from Caribou, Maine.

He was tremendously popular with his students. He had put up a backboard and basketball hoop in the playground and after school he taught them the fundamentals of the game. He was, for all his apparent awkwardness, an athletic fellow, though it didn't show until he was in action - jumping or dribbling a ball down the court. Perhaps it never does. He

ate like a horse, and knowing he lived alone I made a point of inviting him often to dinners for visiting firemen from Kuala Lumpur or Singapore. He didn't have a cook; he said he would not have a servant, but I don't believe he would have got any local person to live in his house, so close to that grotesque tree.

I was sorry but not surprised, two months after he arrived, to hear that Ladysmith had a fever. Ayer Hitam was malarial, and the tablets we took every Sunday like communion were only suppressants. The Chinese headmaster at the school stopped in at the consulate and said that Ladysmith wanted to see me. I went that afternoon.

The house was empty; a few chairs in the sitting room, a shelf of paperbacks, a short-wave radio, and in the room beyond a table holding only a large bottle of ketchup. The kitchen smelled of peanut butter and stale bread. Bachelor's quarters. I climbed the stairs, but before I entered the bedroom I heard Ladysmith call out in an anxious voice, 'Who is it?'

'Boy, am I glad to see you,' he said, relaxing as I came through the door.

He looked thinner, his face was grey, his hair awry in bunches of standing hackles; and he lay in the rumpled bed as if he had been thrown there. His eyes were sunken and oddly coloured with the yellow light of fever.

'Malaria?'

'I think so - I've been taking chloroquine. But it doesn't seem to be working. I've got the most awful headache.' He closed his eyes. 'I can't sleep. I have these nightmares. I -'

'What does the doctor say?'

'I'm treating myself,' said Ladysmith.

'You'll kill yourself,' I said. 'I'll send Alec over tonight.'

We talked for a while, and eventually I convinced Ladysmith that he needed attention. Alec Stewart was a member of the Club Ladysmith particularly disliked. He wasn't a bad

sort, but as he was married to a Chinese girl he felt he could call them 'Chinks' without blame. He had been a ship's surgeon in the Royal Navy and had come to Ayer Hitam after the war. With a young wife and all that sunshine he was able to reclaim some of his youth. Back at the office I sent Peeraswami over with a pot of soup and the latest issue of *Newsweek* from the consulate library.

Alec went that night. I saw him at the Club later. He said, 'Our friend's pretty rocky.'

'I had malaria myself,' I said. 'It wasn't much fun.'

Alec blew a cautionary snort. 'He's not got malaria. He's got dengué.'

'Are you sure?'

'All the symptoms are there.'

'What did you give him for it?'

'The only thing there is worth a docken - aspirin.'

'I suppose he'll have to sweat it out.'

'He'll do that all right.' Alec leaned over. 'The lad's having hallucinations.'

'I didn't know that was a symptom of dengué,' I said.

'Dengué's a curse.'

He described it to me. It is a virus, carried by a mosquito, and begins as a headache of such voltage that you tremble and can't stand or sit. You're knocked flat; your muscles ache, you're doubled up with cramp and your temperature stays over a hundred. Then your skin becomes paper-thin, sensitive to the slightest touch - the weight of a sheet can cause pain. And your hair falls out - not all of it, but enough to fill a comb. These severe irritations produce another agony, a depression so black the dengué sufferer continually sobs. All the while your bones ache, as if every inch of you has been smashed with a hammer. This sensation of bruising gives dengué its colloquial name, 'break-bone fever'. I pitied Ladysmith.

Although it was after eleven when Alec left the Club, I went straight over to Ladysmith's house. I was walking up

the gravel drive when I heard the most ungodly shriek – frightening in its intensity and full of alarm. I did not recognize it as Ladysmith's – indeed, it scarcely sounded human. But it was coming from his room. It was so loud and changed in pitch with such suddenness it might easily have been two or three people screaming, or a dozen doomed cats. The Midnight Horror tree was in full bloom and filled the night with stink.

Ladysmith lay in bed whimpering. The magazine I'd sent him was tossed against the wall, and the effect of disorder was heightened by the overhead fan which was lifting and ruffling the pages.

He was propped on one arm, but seeing me he sighed and fell back. His face was slick with perspiration and tear-streaks. He was short of breath.

'Are you all right?'

'My skin is burning,' he said. I noticed his lips were swollen and cracked with fever, and I saw then how dengué was like a species of grief.

'I thought I heard a scream,' I said. Screaming takes energy; Ladysmith was beyond screaming, I thought.

'Massacre,' he said. 'Soldiers – killing women and children. Horrible. Over there –' he pointed to a perfectly ordinary table with a jug of water on it, and he breathed, 'War. You should see their faces all covered with blood. Some have arms missing. I've never –' He broke off and began to sob.

'Alec says you have dengué fever,' I said.

'Two of them – women. They look the same,' said Ladysmith lifting his head. 'They scream at me, and it's so loud! They have no teeth!'

'Are you taking the aspirin?' I saw the amber jar was full.

'Aspirin! For this!' He lay quietly, then said, 'I'll be all right. Sometimes it's nothing – just a high temperature. Then these Chinese . . . then I get these dreams.'

'About war?'

'Yes. Flashes.'

As gently as I could I said, 'You didn't want to go to Vietnam, did you?'

'No. Nobody wanted to go. I registered as a c.o.'

Hallucinations are replies. Peeraswami was always seeing Tamil ghosts on his way home. They leapt from those green fountains by the road the Malays call *daun pontianak* - 'ghost leaf' - surprising him with plates of hot samosas or tureens of curry; not so much ghosts as ghostesses. I told him to eat something before setting out from home in the dark and he stopped seeing them. I took Ladysmith's visions of massacre to be replies to his conscientious objection. It is the draft-dodger who speaks most graphically of war, not the soldier. Pacifists know all the atrocity stories.

But Ladysmith's hallucinations had odd highlights: the soldiers he saw weren't American. They were dark orientals in dirty undershirts, probably Vietcong, and mingled with the screams of the people with bloody faces was another sound, the creaking of bicycle seats. So there were two horrors - the massacre and these phantom cyclists. He was especially frightened by the two women with no teeth, who opened their mouths wide and screamed at him.

I said, 'Give it a few days.'

'I don't think I can take much more of this.'

'Listen,' I said. 'Dengué can depress you. You'll feel like giving up and going home - you might feel like hanging yourself. But take these aspirin and keep telling yourself - whenever you get these nightmares - it's dengué fever.'

His head dropped to the pillow, his eyes closed, and I remember thinking: everyone is fighting this war, everyone in the world. Poor Ladysmith was fighting hardest of all. Lying there he could have been bivouacked in the Central Highlands, haggard from a siege, his dengué a version of battle fatigue.

I left him sleeping and walked again through the echoing

house. But the smell had penetrated to the house itself, the high thick stink of rotting corpses. It stung my eyes and I almost fainted with the force of it until, against the moon, I saw that blossoming coat-rack and the wheeling bats – The Midnight Horror.

‘Rotting flesh,’ Ladysmith said late the next afternoon. I tried not to smile. I had brought Alec along for a second look. Ladysmith began describing the smell, the mutilated people, the sound of bicycles and those Chinese women, the toothless ones. The victims had pleaded with him. Ladysmith looked wretched.

Alec said, ‘How’s your head?’

‘It feels like it’s going to explode.’

Alec nodded. ‘Joints a bit stiff?’

‘Dengué’s a curse.’ Alec smiled: doctors so often do when their grim diagnosis is proved right.

‘*I can’t* –’ Ladysmith started, then grimaced and continued in a softer tone. ‘I can’t sleep. If I could only sleep I’d be all right. For God’s sake give me something to make me sleep.’

Alec considered this.

‘Can’t you give him anything?’ I asked.

‘I’ve never prescribed a sleeping pill in my life,’ said Alec, ‘and I’m not going to do so now. Young man, take my advice. Drink lots of liquid – you’re dehydrating. You’ve got a severe fever. Don’t underestimate it. It can be a killer. But I guarantee if you follow my instructions, get lots of bed-rest, take aspirin every four hours, you’ll be right as ninepence.’

‘My hair is falling out.’

Alec smiled – right again. ‘Dengué,’ he said. ‘But you’ve still got plenty. When you’ve as little hair as I have you’ll have something to complain about.’

Outside the house I said, ‘That tree is the most malignant thing I’ve ever seen.’

Alec said, ‘You’re talking like a Chink.’

'Sure, it looks innocent enough now, with the sun shining on it. But have you smelled it at night?'

'I agree. A wee aromatic. Like a Bengali's fart.'

'If we cut it down I think Ladysmith would stop having his nightmares.'

'Don't be a fool. The tree's medicinal. The Malays use it for potions. It works - I use it myself.'

'Well, if it's so harmless why don't the Malays want to live in this house?'

'It's not been offered to a Malay. How many Malay teachers do you know? It's the Chinks won't live here - I don't have a clue why that's so, but I won't have you running down that tree. It's going to cure our friend.'

I stopped walking. 'What do you mean by that?'

Alec said, 'The aspirin - or rather, not the aspirin. I'm using native medicine. Those tablets are made from the bark of that tree - I wish it didn't have that shocking name.'

'You're giving him *that*?'

'Calm down, it'll do him a world of good,' Alec said brightly. 'Ask any witch-doctor.'

I slept badly myself that night, thinking of Alec's ridiculous cure - he had truly gone bush - but I was tied up all day with visa inquiries and it was not until the following evening that I got back to Ladysmith's. I was determined to take him away. I had aspirin at my house; I'd keep him away from Alec.

Downstairs, I called out and knocked as usual to warn him I'd come, and as usual there was no response from him. I entered the bedroom and saw him asleep, but uncovered. Perhaps the fever had passed: his face was dry. He did not look well, but then few people do when they're sound asleep - most take on the ghastly colour of illness. Then I saw that the amber bottle was empty - the 'aspirin' bottle.

I tried to feel his pulse. Impossible: I've never been able to feel a person's pulse, but his hand was cool, almost cold. I put

my ear against his mouth and thought I could detect a faint purr of respiration.

It was dusk when I arrived, but darkness in Ayer Hitam fell quickly, the blanket of night dropped and the only warning was the sound of insects tuning up, the chirrup of geckoes and those squeaking bats making for the tree. I switched on the lamp and as I did so heard a low cry, as of someone dying in dreadful pain. And there by the window – just as Ladysmith had described – I saw the moonlit faces of two Chinese women, smeared with blood. They opened their mouths and howled; they were toothless and their screeches seemed to gain volume from that emptiness.

‘Stop!’ I shouted.

The two faces in those black rags hung there, and I caught the whiff of the tree which was the whiff of wounds. It should have scared me, but it only surprised me. Ladysmith had prepared me, and I felt certain that he had passed that horror on. I stepped forward, caught the cord and dropped the window-blinds. The two faces were gone.

This took seconds, but an after-image remained, like a lamp switched rapidly on and off. I gathered up Ladysmith. Having lost weight he was very light, pathetically so. I carried him downstairs and through the garden to the road.

Behind me, in the darkness, was the rattle of pedals, the squeak of a bicycle seat. The phantom cyclists! It gave me a shock, and I tried to run, but carrying Ladysmith I could not move quickly. The cycling noises approached, frantic squeaking at my back. I spun round.

It was a trishaw, cruising for fares. I put Ladysmith on the seat, and running alongside it we made our way to the mission hospital.

A stomach pump is little more than a slender rubber tube pushed into one nostril and down the back of the throat. A primitive device: I couldn’t watch. I stayed until Ladysmith

regained consciousness. But it was useless to talk to him. His stomach was empty and he was coughing up bile, spewing into a bucket. I told the nursing sister to keep an eye on him.

I said, 'He's got dengue.'

The succeeding days showed such an improvement in Ladysmith that the doctors insisted he be discharged to make room for more serious cases. And indeed everyone said he'd made a rapid recovery. Alce was astonished, but told him rather sternly, 'You should be ashamed of yourself for taking that overdose.'

Ladysmith was well, but I didn't have the heart to send him back to that empty house. I put him at my own place. Normally, I hated house-guests - they interfered with my reading and never seemed to have much to do themselves except punish my gin bottle. But Ladysmith was unobtrusive. He drank milk, he wrote letters home. He made no mention of his hallucinations, and I didn't tell him what I'd thought I'd seen. In my own case I believe his suggestions had been so strong that I had imagined what he had seen - somehow shared his own terror of the toothless women.

One day at lunch Ladysmith said, 'How about eating out tonight? On me. A little celebration. After all, you saved my life.'

'Do you feel well enough to face the Club buffet?'

He made a face. 'I hate the Club - no offence. But I was thinking of a meal in town. What about that *kedai* - City Bar? I had a terrific meal there the week I arrived. I've been meaning to go back.'

'You're the boss.'

It was a hot night. The verandah tables were taken, so we had to sit inside, jammed against a wall. We ordered: mee-hoon soup, spring rolls, pork strips, fried kway-teow and a bowl of laksa that seemed to blister the lining of my mouth.

'One thing's for sure,' said Ladysmith, 'I won't get dengue fever again for a while. The sister said I'm immune for a year.'

'Thank God for that,' I said. 'By then you'll be back in Caribou, Maine.'

'I don't know,' he said. 'I like it here.'

He was smiling, glancing around the room, poking noodles into his mouth. Then I saw him lose control of his chopsticks. His jaw dropped, he turned pale, and I thought for a moment that he was going to cry.

'Is anything wrong?'

He shook his head, but he looked stricken.

'It's this food,' I said. 'You shouldn't be eating such strong -'

'No,' he said. 'It's those pictures.'

On the white-washed wall of the *kedai* was a series of framed photographs, old hand-coloured ones, lozenge-shaped, like huge lockets. Two women and some children. Not so unusual; the Chinese always have photographs of relations around - a casual reverence. One could hardly call them a pious people; their brand of religion is ancestor worship, the simple display of the family album. But I had not realized until then that Woo Boh Swee's relations had had money. The evidence was in the pictures: both women were smiling, showing large sets of gold dentures.

'That's them,' said Ladysmith.

'Who?' I said. Staring at them I noticed certain wrinkles of familiarity, but the Chinese are very hard to tell apart. The cliché is annoyingly true.

Ladysmith put his chopsticks down and began to whisper: 'The women in my room - that's *them*. That one had blood on her hair, and the other one -'

'Dengue fever,' I said. 'You said they didn't have any teeth. Now I ask you - look at those teeth. You've got the wrong ladies, my boy.'

'No!'

His pallor had returned, and the face I saw across the table was the one I had seen on that pillow. I felt sorry for him, as helpless as I had before.

Woo Boh Swce, the owner of City Bar, went by the table. He was brisk, snapping a towel. 'Okay? Anything? More beer? What you want?'

'We're fine, Mr Woo,' I said. 'But I wonder if you can tell us something. We were wondering who those women are in the pictures - over there.'

He looked at the wall, grunted, lowered his head and simply walked away, muttering.

'I don't get it,' I said. I left the table and went to the back of the bar, where Boh Swce's son Reggie - the 'English' son - was playing mah-jongg. I asked Reggie the same question: who are they?

'I'm glad you asked me,' said Reggie. 'Don't mention them to my father. One's his auntie, the other one's his sister. It's a sad story. They were cut up during the war by the dwarf bandits. That's what my old man calls them in Hokkien. The Japanese. It happened over at the headquarters - what they used for headquarters when they occupied the town. My old man was in Singapore.'

'But the Japanese were only here for a few months,' I said.

'Bunch of thieves,' said Reggie. 'They took anything they could lay their hands on. They used those old ladies for house-girls, at the headquarters, that big house, where the tree is. Then they killed them, just like that, and hid the bodies - we never found the graves. But that was before they captured Singapore. The British couldn't stop them, you know. The dwarf bandits were clever - they pretended they were Chinese and rode all the way to the Causeway on bicycles.'

I looked back at the table. Ladysmith was staring, his eyes again bright with fever; staring at those gold teeth.

The South Malaysia Pineapple Growers' Association

We had a drama society, but it was not called the South Malaysia Pineapple Growers' Drama Society; it was the Foot-lighters, it met on Wednesday evenings in the Club lounge, and the Official Patron was the Sultan. He seldom came to the plays and never to the Club. It was just as well, the Foot-lighters said; when the Sultan was at the theatre you couldn't drink at the bar between the acts, which was why most of the audience came, the men anyway. Angela Miller, who drove from Layang Layang every Wednesday, said the Sultan was a frightful old bore whose single interest was polo.

An effortlessly deep-voiced woman, much more handsome at forty-five than she had been pretty at twenty, Angela had played a Wilde heroine six years before – that was in Kota Bharu – and found the role so agreeable, so suited to her temper, that in moments of stress she became that heroine; telling a story, she used the heroine's inflections and certain facial expressions, especially incredulity. Often, it allowed her to manage her anger.

It was Angela who told the story of Jan's first visit to the Club. Jan had looked at the photographs on the wall of the bar and then sat in a lounge chair sipping her gimlet while the other members talked. Only Angela had seen Jan rush to the window and exclaim, 'What a *lovely* time of day!'

'All I could see were the tennis courts,' said Angela later, 'but little Jan said, "Look at the air – it's like *silk*."'

Jan Prosser was new, not only to the Club and the Foot-lighters, but to Ayer Hitam, where her husband Rupert had

just been posted to cut down a rubber estate and oversee the planting of oil palms.

'Anyone,' said Angela, 'who spends that long looking out of the window *has* to be new to Ayer Hitam. I look out of the window and don't see a blessed thing!'

It happened only the previous week. Already it was one of Angela's stories; she had a story to explain the behaviour of every Footlighter and, it was said, most planter families. That exclamation at sundown was all the Footlighters knew of Jan on the evening they met to pick a new play. She was a pale girl, perhaps twenty-six, with a small head and damp, nervous eyes. Some of the male Footlighters had spoken to Jan's husband; they had found him hearty, with possibilities backstage, but mainly interested in fishing.

Angela was chairing the meeting; they had narrowed the selection to *Private Lives* and *The World of Suzie Wong*, and before anyone asked her opinion, Jan said, 'We did *Private Lives* in Nigeria.' It was an innocent remark, but Jan was slightly impatient and gave it a dogmatic edge, which surprised the rest into silence.

'Oh, really?' said Angela in her intimidating bass after a pause. She trilled the *r* as she would have done on stage, and she glared at Jan.

'Yes, um,' said Jan, 'I played Amanda. Rupert helped with the sets.' She smiled and closed her eyes, remembering. 'What a night that was. It rained absolute *buckets*.'

'Maybe we should put it on here,' said Duff Gillespie. 'We need some rain over at my place.'

Everyone laughed, Angela loudest of all, and Jan said, 'It's a very witty play. Two excellent women's parts and lots of good lines.'

'Epicene,' said Tony Evans.

'I've noticed,' said Henry Eliot, a white-haired man who usually played fathers, 'that when you use a big word, Tony, you never put it in a sentence. It's rather cowardly.'

'That's who we're talking about,' said Tony, affecting rather than speaking in the Welsh accent that was natural to him. 'Noel Coward.'

'Too-bloody-shay,' said Duff, 'pardon my French.'

Jan looked from face to face; she wondered if they were making fun of her.

'That settles it,' said Angela. '*Suzie Wong* it is.'

'When did we decide that?' asked Henry, making a face.

'You didn't,' said Angela, 'I did. We can't have squabbling.' She smiled at Jan. 'You'll find me fantastically dictatorial, my dear. Pass me that script, would you, darling?' Angela took the grey booklet that Tony Evans had been flipping through. She put it on the table, opened it decisively to *Cast, in Order of Their Appearance*, and ran the heel of her hand down the fold, flattening it. She said, 'Now for the cast.'

At eleven-thirty, all the main parts had been allotted. 'Except one,' said Jan.

'I beg your pardon,' said Angela.

'I mean, it's all set, isn't it? Except that we haven't -' She looked at the others - 'we haven't decided the biggest part, have we?'

Angela gave Jan her look of incredulity. She did it with wintry slowness, and it made Jan pause and know she had said something wrong. So Jan laughed, it was a nervous laugh, and she said, 'I mean, who's Suzie?'

'Who indeed?' said Henry in an Irish brogue. He took his pipe out of his mouth to chuckle; then he returned the pipe and the chuckling stopped. He derived an unusual joy from watching two women disagree. His smile was like triumph.

'You've got your part,' said Angela, losing control of her accent. 'I should say it's a jolly good one.'

'Oh, I know that!' Jan said. 'But I was wondering about -' She looked at the table and said, 'I take it you're going to play Suzie.'

'Unless anyone has any serious objections,' said Angela. No one said a word. Angela addressed her question to Jan, 'Do you have any serious objections?'

'Well, not *serious* objections,' said Jan, trying to sound good-humoured.

'Maybe she thinks -' Duff started.

Angela interrupted, 'Perhaps I'm too old for the part, Jan, is that what you're trying to say?'

'God, not that,' said Jan, becoming discomposed. 'Honestly, Angela, I think you're perfect for it, really I do.'

'What is it then?'

Jan seemed reluctant to begin, but she had gone too far to withdraw. Her hands were clasped in her lap and now she was speaking to Duff, whose face was the most sympathetic. 'I don't want to make this sound like an objection, but the point is, Suzie is supposed to be, well, *Chinese* . . . and, Angela, you're not, um, Chinese. Are you?'

'Not as far as I know,' said Angela, raising a laugh. The laughter subsided. 'But I am an actress.'

'I know that,' said Jan, 'and I'm dead sure you'd do a marvellous Suzie.' Jan became eager. 'I'm terribly excited about this production, really I am. But what if we got a Chinese girl from town to play Suzie. I mean, a *real* Chinese girl, with one of those dresses slit up the side and that long black hair and that sort of slinky -'

Angela's glare prevented Jan from going any further.

'It's a challenging role,' said Angela, switching her expression from one of disapproval to one of profound interest. 'But so are they all, and we must be up to it. Henry is going to play the old Chinese man. Would you prefer that Stanley did it?'

Stanley Chee, a man of sixty, with gold-rimmed glasses and a starched uniform, was Head Boy of the Club, and at that moment he could be seen - all heads turned - through the bar door, looking furtive as he wiped a bottle.

Jan shook her head from side to side.

'It's going to be a hard grind,' said Angela, and she smiled. 'But that's what acting is. Being someone else. Completely. That's what I tell all the new people.'



The Butterfly of the Laruts

The people in Ayer Hitam stopped referring to her as Doctor Smith as soon as they set eyes on her. She was 'that woman', then 'our friend', and only much later, after she had left the district and when the legend was firmly established, was she Doctor Smith again, the title giving her name a greater mockery than anyone there could manage in a tone of voice. She didn't have much luck with her simple name; as everyone knew, even the man she married could not pronounce it. But that was not so surprising: a narrow ornament, a sliver of ivory he wore in his lower lip, prevented him from saying most words clearly.

She flitted into town that first day in a bright, wax-print sarong, and with a loose pale blouse through which you could see her breasts in nodding motion. She might have been one of those ravished American women, grazing the parapet of middle age, with a monotonous libido and an expensive camera, vowing to have a fling at the romance travel was supposed to provide. But she was far from frivolous, and she had not been in the district long before it became apparent that she was anything but typical.

A typical visitor stayed at the Government Rest House or the Club, but Doctor Smith never went near either of them, nor did she stay at the Chinese hotels. Her few days in Ayer Hitam were passed at a Malay *kedai*, a fly-blown shop on a back road. It was assumed she shared a room. You can imagine the speculation. But she had the magic travellers sometimes have, of finding in a place something the residents have missed and giving it a brief celebrity.

So, after she had gone into the jungle, some of us used this *kedai* and we discovered that it employed as sweepers several men from a small tribe of *orang asli* who lived sixty miles to the north, in an isolated pouch of jungle near one of Fred Squibb's timber estates. Their looks were unmistakable. That should have been our first clue: we knew she was an anthropologist, we heard she had taken a taxi north, and Squibb, the timber merchant, said the taxi had dropped her at the bush track which met the main road and extended some fifteen miles to the *kampung*. There had been, he said, half a dozen tribesmen – Laruts, they were called – squatting at the trampled mouth of the path. Squibb said they were waiting for her and that they might have been there, roosting like owls, for days.

We had seen anthropologists before. Their sturdy new clothes and neatly-packed rucksacks, tape-recorders and parcels of books and paper, gave them away immediately. But Doctor Smith caused a local sensation. No one since Sir Hugh Clifford had studied the Laruts; they were true natives, small people with compressed negroid features, clumsy innocent faces and long arms, who had been driven into the interior as the Malays and Chinese crowded the peninsula. There were few in the towns. You saw them unexpectedly tucked in the bends of bush roads, with the merchandise they habitually sold, red and yellow parrots – flapping things snared in the jungle, unused to the ingeniously-woven Larut cages; and orchids harvested from the trunks of forest trees; and butterflies, as large as those orchids, mounted lopsidedly in cigar boxes. The Laruts were our savages, proof we were civilized: Malays especially measured themselves by them. Their movements, jinking in the forest, were like the flights of the butterflies they sold on the roadsides with aboriginal patience. Selling such graceful stuff was appropriate to this gentle tribe for, as was well-known, they were non-violent: they did not make weapons, they didn't fight. They had been hunted for sport, like frail deer, by early settlers. As the Malays and the Chinese grew

more quarrelsome and assertive, the Laruts responded by moving further and further inland, until they came to rest on hillsides and in swamps, enduring the extremes of landscape to avoid hostile contact.

But Doctor Smith found them, and a week later there were no Laruts on the road, no butterflies for sale, only the worn patches on the grassy verge where they had once waited with their cages and boxes, smoking their oddly-shaped pipes.

At the Club, Angela said, 'I expect we'll see her in town buying clothes.' But no one saw her, nor did we see much of the other Laruts. They had withdrawn, it seemed, to the deepest part of the forest, and their absence from the roads made those stretches particularly cheerless. We guessed at what might be going on in the Larut *kampung*, and with repetition our guesses acquired all the neatness and authority of facts. Then we had a witness.

Squibb went to the area; he brought back this story. He had borrowed a motorbike at one of his sub-stations and had ridden it over the bush track until at last he came to the outskirts of the *kampung*. He saw some children playing and asked in Malay if 'the white queen' was around. They took him to her, and he said he was astonished to see her kneeling in the dust by a hut, pounding some food in a mortar with several other Larut women. They were stripped to the waist chanting.

'You could have knocked me down with a feather,' Squibb said. He spat in disgust and went on to say how dirty she was; her sarong was in tatters, her hands filthy. Apparently he went over to her, but she ignored him. Finally, she spoke.

'Can't you see I'm busy?' She went on heaving the pestle.

Squibb was persistent. She said (and this was the sentence I heard Squibb repeating in the Club lounge for days afterward): 'We don't want you here.'

There were other stories, but most of them seemed to originate with Squibb: the Ministry of Tourism was angry

that the Laruts had stopped selling butterflies on the road; the missionaries in the area, Catholic fathers from Canada, were livid because the Larut children had stopped going to the mission school, and for the first time in many years the mission's dispensary – previously filled with snakebite victims and Laruts with appendicitis and strangulated hernias – was nearly empty. There was more: the Laruts had started to move their *kampung*, putting up huts in the heavily-forested portion of jungle that adjoined Squibb's timber estate.

'She's a menace,' Squibb said.

He came to me at the consulate and sat, refusing to leave until I listened to the last of his stories.

'There's nothing I can do,' I said.

'She's an American – you can send her home.'

'I don't see any evidence of treachery here,' I said.

'She's sticking her nose in where she's not wanted!'

'That's a matter for the Malaysians to decide.'

'They're as browned-off as I am,' Squibb said. He became solicitous about the Laruts; odd – he had always spoken of them as a nuisance, interrupting the smooth operation of his lumber mills with their poaching and thieving.

A day or two later, the District Commissioner dropped in. He was a dapper, soft-spoken Malay named Azhari, educated in London; he had a reputation as a sport, and his adventures with various women at the Club were well known. There were 'Azhari stories'. He informed me politely that he was serving a deportation order on Doctor Smith.

'What for?'

'Interfering in the internal affairs of our country,' he said. I wondered if she had turned him down.

'You've been talking to Squibb,' I said. He smiled; he didn't deny it.

It was Azhari's assistant who cycled to the village with the deportation order; it was he who brought us the news of the marriage.

At the Club, people said to me, 'You Americans,' and this was the only time in my two years at the consulate there, that Ayer Hitam was ever mentioned in the world's press. It was so unusual, seeing the town in the paper, mentions of the Club, City Bar, the *kedai* where Doctor Smith had stayed, each one shabbily hallowed to a shrine by the coarse prose of journalists. They attempted a description of our heat, our trees, our roads, our way of life; struggling to make us unique they only succeeded in making us ridiculous (I was the 'youthful American Consul'). They spelled all our names wrong.

There were photographs of Doctor Smith and the chief. She wore a printed scarf across her breasts in a makeshift halter, her hair knotted, and around her neck a great wooden necklace. He had a headgear of parrot feathers, leather armlets on his biceps, and heavy earrings; he was a small man of perhaps fifty, with a worried furrowed face and tiny ears. In the photographs he looked cross-eyed, but that might have been his worry distorted in the strong light. She towered over him, triumphant, wistful. His arm was awkwardly crooked in hers. Around them were many blurred grinning faces of Larut well-wishers.

'We are very much in love,' she was reported to have said. 'We plan to have lots of children.' 'I know my duties as a Larut wife.'

It was not simple. The Laruts, idle and good-hearted, were polygamous. The chief had eight wives. Doctor Smith was the ninth.

This was the last we heard of her for several months.

Father Lefever from the mission came to see me one afternoon. He was circumspect; he asked permission to smoke and then set fire to a stinking cheroot. In the middle of casual remarks about the late monsoon he said, 'You must do something about that woman.'

'So what Squibb said about the dispensary is true.'

'I don't know what he said, but I think this woman could

the state, the closing of the mission, and Squibb's timber operation which, it was said, made that little bush track into a road wide enough for huge timber trucks to collect the trees that were felled in and around the derelict village.

The Tennis Court

Everyone hated Shimura; but no one really knew him: Shimura was Japanese. He was not a member of the Club. About every two weeks he would stop one night in Ayer Hitam on his way to Singapore. He spent the day in Singapore and stopped again on the way back. Using us – which was how Evans put it – he was avoiding two nights at an expensive Singapore hotel. I say he wasn't in our Club; yet he had full use of the facilities, because he was a member of the Selangor Club in Kuala Lumpur and we had reciprocal privileges. Seeing his blue Toyota appear in the driveway, Evans always said, 'Here comes the freeloader.'

Squibb said, 'I say, there's a nip in the air.'

And Alec said, 'Shoot him down.'

I didn't join them in their bigoted litany. I liked Shimura. I was ashamed of myself for not actively defending him, but I was sure he didn't need my help.

That year there were hundreds of Japanese businessmen in Kuala Lumpur selling transistor radios to the Malays. It seemed a harmless enough activity, but the English resented them and saw them as poaching on what they considered an exclusively British preserve. Evans said, 'I didn't fight the war so that those people could tell us how to run our Club.'

Shimura was a tennis player. On his fifth or sixth visit he had suggested, in a way his stuttering English had blunted into a tactless complaint, that the ball-boys moved around too much.

'They must stand quiet.'

It was the only thing he had ever said, and it damned him. Typical Japanese attitude, people said, treating our ball-boys like prisoners of war. Tony Evans, chairman of the Tennis Committee, found it unforgivable. He said to Shimura, 'There are courts in Singapore,' but Shimura only laughed.

He seemed not to notice that he was hated. His composure was perfect. He was a small dark man, fairly young, with ropes of muscle knotted on his arms and legs, and his crouch on the court made him seem four-legged. He played a hard darting game with a towel wound around his neck like a scarf and he barked loudly when he hit the ball.

He always arrived late in the afternoon, and before dinner played several sets with anyone who happened to be around. Alec had played him, so had Eliot and Strang; he had won every match. Evans, the best player in the Club, refused to meet him on the tennis court. If there was no one to play, Shimura hit balls against the wooden backboard, barking at the hard ones, and he practised with such determination you could hear his grunts as far as the reading room. He ate alone and went to bed early. He spoke to no one; he didn't drink. I sometimes used to think that if he had spent some time in the bar, like the other temporary members who passed through Ayer Hitam, Shimura would have had no difficulty.

Alec said, 'Not very clubbable.'

'Ten to one he's fiddling his expenses,' said Squibb.

Evans criticized his lob.

He could not have been hated more. His nationality, his size, his stinginess, his laugh, his choice of tennis partners (once he had played Eliot's sexually browsing wife); everything told against him. He was aloof, one of the worst social crimes in Malaysia; he was identified as a parasite, and worst of all he seemed to hold everyone in contempt. Offences were invented: he bullied the ball-boys, he parked his car the wrong way, he made noises when he ate.

It may be hard to be an American - I sometimes thought so